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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1962 Vol. 10, No. 5

COMPLETE JOHNNY LIDDELL NOVEL

THE MOURNING AFTER

by FRANK KANE

Big names and glamorous women were part of Liddell's Manhattan World. But in Hollywood a private-eye can hardly avoid surprises—when even murder's on the gilded side.

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THE MOURNING AFTER

by FRANK KANE

It's not unusual for a top-echelon New York private eye to have a few misleading ideas about Hollywood. But Johnny was a fast learner . . . when murder reared its ugly head.

THE LEGEND on the pebbled glass door that led to the corridor read in reverse "Jerry Blake —*Private Investigation.*"

The man at the desk was slim, curly headed. He sat scowling at the report he had just pulled from the rollers of his typewriter. Behind him, a big window overlooked a panorama of New York from the thirtieth floor. It was clear, bright and the buildings stood out in bold relief.

Jerry Blake got up from his desk, paced the floor. Little knives of worry cut deep lines in his face. It was obvious that he was faced with a decision of major importance.

Suddenly, the door to the corridor slammed open. A heavy set man rushed in, kicked the door

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THE FINEST . . . THE NEWEST

JOHNNY LIDDELL BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

shut behind him. For a moment, Blake was frozen to where he stood. He lunged at the newcomer, but that one moment had been enough. The big man swung, Blake fielded a roundhouse to the jaw that sent him sprawling on the floor under the window.

The big man growled deep in his chest, rushed at him. Blake brought his knees back, kicked up. He caught the big man in the pit of the stomach with the soles of his feet, lifted him upward and out. The window shattered, the big man took sash and all as he disappeared through it.

The man on the floor lay still for a moment.

Then, from behind the camera, a deep voice approved, "Okay. We got it."

The man on the floor got up, brushed himself off.

The man he'd flipped through the window stepped back over the sill, back into the room, He caught the curly headed man by the arm, swung him around. This time, when he threw the right hand, it hadn't been written into the script. It slammed the smaller man against the wall of the set, where he slid to a sitting position, a trickle of blood snaking from the corner of his mouth.

The stunt man started for him again, but by now half a dozen men were surrounding him, holding him back.

"You crazy, Mac?" a man in a striped, three button sweater yelled at him. "You trying to get yourself blacklisted on every lot in town?"

The big man stopped struggling. "You saw what he did."

The man in the striped sweater shook his head. "All I saw was a perfect take, What was I supposed to see?"

"Artie Mays and me, we went through this stunt three times to show that creep how the flip should be done. All he's got to do is put his feet up, I stretch out on them and he flips me through the window and I land on the mattress on the other side. So what does he do?"

The man in the sweater sighed. "What does he do?"

"Instead of just putting his feet up, he digs them into my gut and tosses me clear of the mattress on the other side. I almost broke my back—"

The curly haired man shouldered his way through the group clotted around the stunt man. He held a handkerchief to the corner of his mouth. When the stunt man saw him, he made a lunge for him, permitted himself to be blocked by the director.

"Get him off the set," the curly haired man growled. "And keep him off."

The director wheeled on him. "Now, wait a minute, Dirk."

"You heard me," the star's voice quivered with anger. "Either you

bar him from this lot or I don't do another day's work until my jaw clears up. And that's not likely to be soon."

"You can't do that. You know the tight schedule we're working on," the man in the striped sweater argued. "We're shooting them back to back as it is to meet deadlines."

"You heard me. Either he's off this lot in ten minutes or I am. And if it's me, I'm not coming back until I'm damn good and ready." He turned his back on the director, elbowed his way through the men surrounding them and headed for his dressing room.

The director ran the heel of his hand along the side of his jaw. He turned back to the stunt man, shrugged helplessly. "I've got to get six of these horrors into the can by the first, Mac. What can I do?"

"You mean you're going to let him run me off the lot?"

The director tried to meet the stunt man's eyes, didn't make it. "Put yourself in my place. The studio's got a pot-full tied up in the Jerry Blake series. If I blow the deadline, the sponsor walks away and I'm it." He managed to get his eyes up to the other man's face, dropped them at what he saw there. "I'll do everything I can to smooth it over, but in the meantime—"

"In the meantime, I don't work." Mac looked over in the direction of the star's dressing room. "Okay, that's the way it is, that's the way it is. Thanks for nothing." He brought his eyes back to the director, "I'm not blaming you, Mike. I know how it is. But your buddy in there—" He tilted his head in the direction of the dressing room. "Tell him for me he'll be hearing from me. Real soon." He turned, pushed his way out, headed for the studio door.

The man in the striped sweater sighed, shook his head. He turned to the assistant director. "You better get the front office on the phone, Al." When his assistant scurried off, the director blinked up into the spots. "Okay, you can kill them. There won't be any more shooting until after the lunch break."

One by one the lights blinked off, then the panoramic view of New York went dark. "Maybe not even then," the director added.

II

CARROLL HARTEN, the producer of the Jerry Blake series, was in his sixties, a fact that a careful diet of bourbon and beef, supplemented by frequent massages, failed to hide. His eyes were startlingly blue, enclosed in fine, web-like pouches. The massage hadn't been completely successful, either, in wiping out his tendency to jowliness.

He wasn't smiling now as he sat

behind his desk in his office in Production City. He was leaning back in his chair, his spatulate fingers drumming on the edge of his desk.

Mike Cruze, the director, his striped sweater exchanged for a sport jacket with leather patches on the elbows, sat at the far end of the desk, moodily sucking on his pipe. He took the pipe from between his teeth, leaned over and tapped the dottle into an oversized ashtray on the desk. "Think he'll bother to show at all?"

The man behind the desk bobbed his head petulantly. "He'll show. But first he has to make like the big star. Keep us waiting." He shook his head sadly. "I figured to have trouble with a ham like Messner. But not this much. I'm sorry we ever started the damn series."

"It looked like a sure thing. The boys over in Sales come to us with one all wrapped up, we'd be crazy not to make a try."

"That's just the trouble. We should have taken our time, waited until we got the actor we wanted." Harten raked his fingers through his white hair. "This way it's been nothing but headaches. And on top of everything, the sponsor may walk away from it. And for this we need the kind of aggravation we get from Dirk Messner?"

"You should have to deal with him day in and day out."

"You think I don't?" the white-haired man snorted. "There's not a day that agent of his isn't in here yelling for something else." He started at the sound of the buzzer on his desk, leaned over, snapped it on. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Messner is on his way up, Mr. Harten," the girl on reception told him.

"Thanks, Louise." He snapped the key off, leaned back. "We're about to be honored by the Presence," he told Cruze.

The director nodded glumly, brought out a rolled leather pouch from his pocket. He unfolded it, dipped the bowl of the pipe into it, started loading it with his thumb.

Behind the desk, the white-haired man leaned back, pressed the tips of his fingers together. He scowled when the door opened without a knock. "Don't you ever knock?" Harten asked.

The curly headed man tossed his hat into a chair, grinned at the man behind the desk. "I didn't figure it was like that between you two."

Messner ignored Harten's scowl, walked over to an empty chair, dropped into it. He didn't offer to shake hands, nobody seemed to notice.

"We expected you at nine, Dirk," Harten told him. He consulted the wafer thin Patek Phillippe on his wrist. "It's closer to ten."

"I'm sure you boys had something interesting to talk about. Me, for instance."

Harten ignored the remark. "Mike tells me you delayed production by refusing to work yesterday. You know we're operating on a tight schedule. One afternoon's shooting can mean a lot."

The actor pointed to the slight swelling on his lip. "You couldn't expect me to work with my mouth all swollen. I could hardly talk." He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shook one loose. "I'll be lucky if I can work the rest of this week."

Harten half rose in his chair, his face flooding with color. "Now, look, you—" He regained control of himself with an effort, sank back into his chair. "If you don't work with us, we could lose the sponsor on this series. You have as much to lose in that case as we have. You own twenty-five percent of the package."

Messner took his time lighting the cigarette. "Twenty-five percent of nothing is nothing. The word is out this series is a bomb. It's not going to make a dime, so I have nothing to lose."

"But, if we all worked together, we might still save it."

"It's too late for that. I kept telling you if you'd give me a decent writer and a director who'd listen to reason, we might have pulled it out of the fire, but—"

Mike Cruze jammed the pipestem between his teeth, ground down on it. His hand shook slightly as he lifted a match to the bowl.

The white-haired man cut Messner off with a gesture. "I seem to recall a series you did at Acme called the 'Roving Reporter.' It was cancelled after its first thirteen. Then there was that pilot you did for us on the western series. The only way we could get our money out of it was to slot it as a one shot in an anthology series."

"Nobody bats one thousand."

"Those were the faults of the writer and the director, too?"

Messner took a deep drag from his cigarette, exhaled in twin streams from his nostrils. "So you think I'm no good, eh? That why you came on so strong for me to play the lead in this one? It's not because you like me."

"That's for sure."

"So why the fever to get me?"

Harten dropped his eyes to his carefully manicured nails. "You really want to know?"

"I really want to know."

Harten rolled his eyes up to the actor's face. "It'll be my pleasure. We knew this one was a turkey. But the sponsor liked it and wanted it. We couldn't get anybody else to play it. We were working against a deadline and you were the only one available at a moment's notice."

"I don't believe it."

Harten shrugged. "I don't care

what you believe and what you don't believe. Why should I take the trouble to lie to you?"

Messner took the cigarette from between his lips. "Because you'd like to stick the shiv in me and twist it." He looked up at Harten and grinned. "You never did forgive me for taking Joyce away from you. You'd really like to cut me down to show her what a big man you really are."

Harten twisted his lips in annoyance. "That's ridiculous. That happened a long time ago. Maybe you did me a favor."

Messner pretended to be hurt. "That's a fine way to talk about my wife. I ought to resent it. In fact, I would resent it if it wasn't the truth. I did do you a favor. She would have killed you. There's a lot of woman there, Harten."

"Would it be all right if we kept this discussion on a business plane? I'm not interested in what you think of my personal capacities. Whatever personal differences we may have—what you think of me or what I think of you has nothing to do with it."

"With me it does. You think I don't know you've put the worst hacks you could hire on this series to make me look bad."

"You do too good a job of that yourself, Messner. Keep it up and you'll get yourself run right out of this business. All I'm interested in is that we get this series finished before you do."

"You should live so long," Messner sneered.

Mike Cruze couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Read your contract, Messner. You don't have script approval. Whether they're good or bad, doesn't concern you. We'll take care of that. All you have to do is read your lines well enough so we can print it the first time around."

Messner turned, stared at the director. "Another sensitive artist!" he sneered. He got up from his chair, walked over to the ashtray on the corner of the desk, ground out his cigarette. "Who do you guys think you're kidding? Me? The sponsor? Why do you think he wants out so bad. He knows schlock when he sees it."

"Let the business office worry about the sponsor, Messner. All we have to worry about is making the schedule," Harten said coldly.

The actor raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "We have a schedule?"

"We have a schedule," Cruze put in. "And we start shooting the first thing in the morning. We expect you to be on the set."

Messner grinned a slow, tantalizing grin. "That right? You better get in touch with my agent. Last time I talked to him, we were figuring it might be a week, maybe even ten days, before I could work again."

Mike Cruze ground down on the pipestem so hard, little muscles

formed like grapes along the line of his jaw. "You know we can't let those sets stand. Another unit is yelling for the stages already. We can't afford to strike the sets and rebuild even if we did have the time."

"You do have problems, don't you?" Messner grinned at him. "I'm beginning to see what they mean about this being an ulcer business."

Carroll Harten sat in the big chair, stared at the actor with undisguised hatred, his lips moving soundlessly.

"Don't bother to show me the way out," Messner told him. "I know the way." He touched his finger to his forehead in a salute, turned and sauntered to the door. He turned. "By the way—Joyce asked me to say hello for her." He opened the door, walked out and slammed it behind him.

The white-haired man groaned. He took a deep swallow from his glass, had a fit of coughing. "You've got twelve segments to go and five weeks to make them in. You can't do it. Not with scoring and cutting and everything else."

Cruze nodded gloomily. "I know. I've done my best, Carroll. But between Messner cutting up and the scripts we've been getting —" He shrugged.

"We'll have to keep shooting," Harten said. "Even if it means giving Messner the right to hold us up even more by letting him have final say about everything. But I guess you know what it will probably mean."

Cruze nodded grimly. "I know," he said. "Absolute financial ruin."

"I guess our best out would be to have the ugly son killed, collect the insurance on the production and get ourselves off the hook," Harten growled.

"That makes sense," a voice said from the doorway. "But unfortunately the penalty for murder in this state is the gas chamber."

The producer looked up with a frown and saw that Larry Michaels, from Sales, was standing there smiling at him in mock solemnity, and with a reproving shake of his head.

III

HOLLYWOOD IS A state of mind. It is a small area, completely engulfed by the city of Los Angeles. It huddles at the foot of the Santa Monica mountains, lives in the fading glory of the days when it was the capital of glamor, the home of the movies. Today, movie making is scattered all over the globe, movie stars angle for foreign production to keep them out of the country long enough to evade income taxes. Hollywood's glamor has been diluted by the influx of oil rigs, factories, airplane parts and Iowans.

There is also the Sunset Boulevard Strip where famous restau-

rants lean against each other, cheek to jowl with strip joints that would make New York's 52nd Street look like a finishing school. Here, the bookies and the call girls congregate nightly with no fear of interference. This is the area right in the heart of Los Angeles where its police department has no jurisdiction. Here the county sheriff and his flashily dressed deputies are the law. Here the gossip columnists and the scandal magazines get most of their copy.

Johnny Liddell sat at a ringside table at Maury's on the Strip, watching the featured dancer—a Chinese girl—going through her routine on the tiny floor.

She was small, exquisitely put together in a fragile Oriental way. She stopped in the center of the floor, started to twist and squirm, undulating sensuously from shoulder to ankles. As the music behind her stepped up in tempo, the twisting and squirming became more frenetic. The music hit a peak of rimshots and brass. The girl screamed, the floor went dark. When they came back on, the floor was empty.

Liddell grinned across the tiny table at Muggsy Kiely who sat, making no attempt to hide her boredom. "Okay? You seen enough? Let's move on to someplace—"

"There's another strip coming up," Liddell protested.

"Look, Johnny, if you've seen one naked woman you've seen them all."

"I know," he grinned. "But I've got such a lousy memory. Besides, these are Chinese girls. You know the old saying—"

"I know all the old sayings. I also know that I've had about as much of this opium den as I can stand." She pushed back her chair, stood up. "Do you go home with the gal what brought you or do I make it alone?"

"You talked me into it." He got to his feet. "But now I'll probably never know."

He followed her as she picked her way through the closely packed tables to the door. Behind him, the house lights were going down, the orchestra had started the music for the next strip.

They walked slowly to where Muggsy had parked her Jag halfway up the block. Johnny opened the door on his side, slid in. Muggsy glared at him for a moment, then hightailed it around the car to the driver's side.

Johnny waited until the redhead had roared the car away from the curb, melted it into the stream of traffic that courses the length of the Strip at all hours of the day and night.

"Now where?"

"I'm going to get you home to bed."

Liddell grinned. "That's the best offer I've had tonight."

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm de-

livering you and from there on you're on your own. If you want to spend your evenings playing Peeping Tom you can do it without my help."

"Now, wait a minute, Muggs," Liddell protested. "If you think I'm going to stand still while you deliver me home so you can go out with some other guy—"

The redhead turned from the road, cut him off. "Why not? It's like you always tell me. No strings, no obligations. We have a lot of laughs and we're good for each other." She held out a ringless hand. "But no ties, no ring through the nose. You like to make time with something that looks good to you. Why try to fence me in?"

"Because I'm a man and you're a woman. This makes the difference."

Muggsy took a last drag from her cigarette, flipped it through the window. "I'm almost twenty-eight, Liddell. Another two years and they'll be labelling me an old maid. When a man hits thirty and he's unmarried, everybody figures he's a real romantic figure and living it up. So, instead of being an old maid, I'm going over to your side. I'm going to be a real live-it-up character."

She cut out of the traffic, swung right, stopped at the canopied entrance to a hotel leaning against the side of the hill. She angled the wheels in against the curb. "Well,

goodnight, Johnny. See you around."

Liddell reached past her, turned the keys in the switch. "Goodnight, nothing. You're coming upstairs with me and I'm calling New York. I couldn't sleep without hearing your old man's reaction to this."

He caught her by the arm, pulled her out of the seat, and propelled her across the sidewalk to the entrance of the Hotel Charon.

Five minutes later he was talking over the phone to the girl at the hotel switchboard from the living room of his two-room suite.

"I want to make a person to person, long distance call to New York. I want Jim Kiely at the New York *Dispatch*. Longacre seven-three thousand five hundred."

"I'll call you when I have your party," the voice at the other end promised.

Liddell slammed the receiver on its hook, sat opposite Muggsy on a blue leather sofa and glared at her. She returned the glare with a bland smile.

The phone jangled with such suddenness they both jumped.

Liddell arose, crossed the room in four long strides and jerked the receiver off its hook. "Hello. Jim?"

"Mr. Liddell? This is the desk clerk. There are two men here who insist on seeing you."

"Tell them to come back some other time. I'm busy."

"I know," the desk clerk purred. "I saw her. But these men are police. They want to see you right now."

"Police?" Liddell scowled at the phone, then shrugged. "Send them up."

"They're already on their way," the phone told him.

Liddell slammed down the receiver, picked up his glass, took a deep swallow. "What the hell do the police want? I only got into town today."

"Maybe they think I'm under eighteen," Muggsy told him sweetly.

"Everybody in this damn town is a comic," Liddell complained. There was a rapping at the door, he crossed to it and abruptly pulled it open.

The two men in the hallway were tall, well turned out. They could have been anything from actors to business men. The shield one of them flashed said they were detectives. They walked past Johnny into the living room of the suite, eyed Muggsy appreciatively.

"Hope we're not breaking anything up?" the younger of the two men asked.

"I hope you get your hope. What's it all about?" Liddell wanted to know.

"Do you know Dirk Messner, the actor?"

Liddell frowned. "Why?"

The older detective coughed apologetically. "It gets kind of confusing if everybody asks questions, mister. Suppose we keep it nice and simple. We'll ask the questions, you answer them. Okay?"

"What about Dick Messner?" Liddell persisted.

The two plainclothesmen exchanged glances, the younger one shrugged. "He'll read about it tomorrow. Might as well tell him." He turned, stared at Liddell reflectively. "There's no chance he can spill it before the skipper is ready to break it to the press."

"I guess so," the older detective agreed. He turned to Liddell. "Dirk Messner was murdered tonight."

The telephone jangled. Liddell started for it.

"Nothing doing," the younger cop caught his arm. He nodded to Muggsy. "You answer it, miss."

Muggsy walked over to the phone, held it to her ear. "Yes? Okay." There was a slight pause. "Hello, Dad? Listen good. Dirk Messner, the actor was murdered tonight. The police are keeping it quiet until—"

The older of the two detectives moved with surprising speed. He pulled the telephone from Muggsy's hand, set it back on its hook.

"Who was that?" he asked Muggsy.

She looked at him blandly. "You heard. It was my Dad. He's a movie fan. He gets a big charge out of knowing things first hand. Right, Johnny?"

Johnny Liddell sighed. "Right. A big charge."

The phone started jangling again. The older cop shook his head. "Let him read about it with the rest of the world."

Muggsy shrugged, obediently dropped into her seat.

The detectives turned back to Liddell. "What's your connection with Dirk Messner, Liddell?"

"What makes you think there is any? I just got into town today."

"Some guys are busier than others." The older cop walked over to Liddell. "Look, mister, we don't want to inconvenience anybody. But if you decide not to cooperate with us, we'll just have to—"

"Mind if I see that pretty little badge of yours, officer?" Muggsy broke in.

The younger cop scowled at her. "We've already identified ourselves, lady. If I were you—"

"If you were me, you'd look pretty silly in those size 11 shoes. Just as silly as you'll look if you try to take either of us out of here."

Liddell looked from the cop's face to Muggsy and back. "What's this all about?"

"I happen to know Dirk Messner lives in Beverly Hills," Muggsy told him. "If they expect to sit on it until tomorrow, the killing must have happened in his house. That means these two jokers are Beverly Hills cops. And this is the county." She smiled sweetly at the scowling detectives. "Of course, if you're from the sheriff's office—"

"So what if this is the county? Are you cops or aren't you?" Liddell wanted to know.

"The lady's right," the older cop conceded. "We're police, but we have no jurisdiction here on the Strip. We just thought you might be willing to co-operate. Your name was on a desk pad in Messner's study with a note asking him to call you here."

Liddell nodded. "I checked in with his house the minute I hit town. He hasn't called back." He shrugged. "I guess he's not about to now."

"Not unless he's in the habit of wearing a forty-five slug for a belt buckle." The older cop looked from Liddell to Muggsy and back. "I suppose you spent the evening together? Can account for each other's time?"

Liddell nodded. "I had no reason to kill Messner. He sent for me. Thought his life might be in danger."

"The understatement of the year," the younger cop grunted. He cheerfully lost the battle to keep his eyes from Muggsy's crossed knees. She made a half-hearted attempt to pull her dress down, gave it up. She ignored Liddell's glare.

"I don't suppose you'd care to take a run out to Messner's place and have a talk with the lieutenant?"

Liddell considered, glanced at Muggsy who nodded furiously. "Why not?"

"Well," Liddell said. "I can't see any harm in it."

IV

BEVERLY HILLS, like Sunset Boulevard Strip, is outside the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department. But unlike the Strip, where bookies and ladies of the evening have encountered a tolerant laissez-faire attitude, Beverly Hills is one of the most carefully policed areas in the entire country.

Here, where there are more millionaires per square foot than any place else in the world, where there is no hospital and no cemetery, big names from the television and motion picture industries cluster in mutual protection.

Muggsy Kiely swung the Jag off Sunset Boulevard into Doheny and headed up into the hills. The road climbed steeply past stucco houses with tile roofs, pastel colored Spanish types and low slung ranch houses that seemed pasted to the perpendicular lots.

"I don't know why I let you talk me into coming out here," Liddell said. "If those cops had no authority to roust me—"

"You heard what he said. They're sitting on the story out here until tomorrow. Dad's alerted to the fact that Dirk's dead. Now all I have to do is get him some details and the wire services will be getting the story on a Hollywood murder from New York."

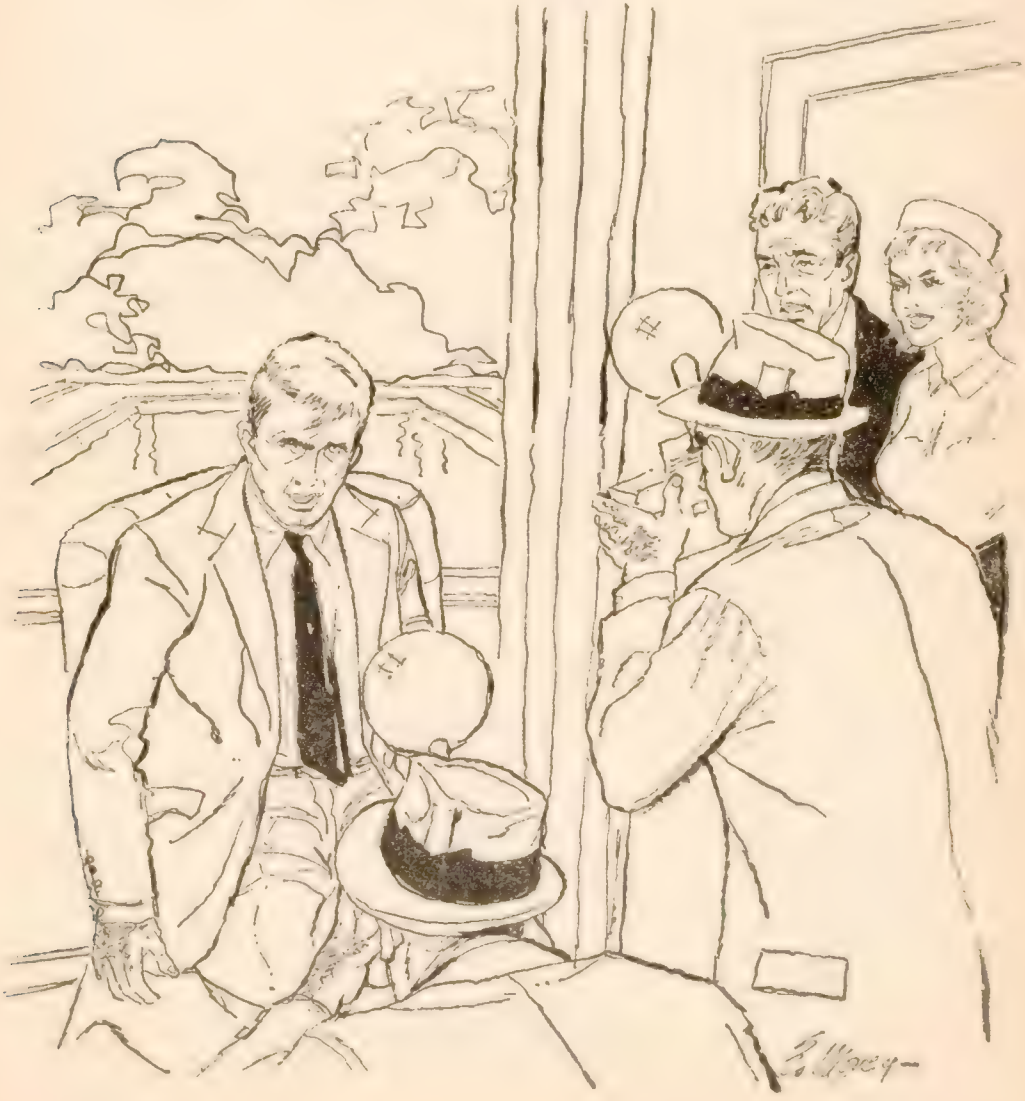
Liddell groaned. "Oh, that'll be just great. That'll make both the

L.A. papers and cops just love us."

Muggsy leaned forward, peered through the windshield. "It's the next house on the left," she announced.

"It damn well better be. That's the last house on the road."

Liddell stiffened in his seat, jammed his foot down on a nonexistent brake as the redhead swung the car off the road onto a small circular driveway. She angled it between a police ambulance and an unmarked black limousine. Two black and white prowl cars, the red blinker casings on their roofs glinting dully stood on the apron of the garage.



Johnny Liddell unfolded himself from the low-slung Jag, stepped out onto the driveway and stretched his cramped back. The house itself was up a short flight of stairs, perched on the high point of the road.

As Muggsy walked around to join him, the door to one of the prowl cars opened, a tall policeman stepped out. He dropped a butt to the cement apron, crushed it out, headed toward where they stood.

"Looking for something, folks?" He wasted an incurious glance on Liddell, let his eyes wander from the top of Muggsy's head to her shoes with appropriate stops on the way.

Liddell took out his wallet and let the officer read a small white card encased in cellophane. "Would it be all right with you if we join the party?" he said. "Your lieutenant asked me to come by."

The cop considered, shrugged. "Be my guest." He watched while Liddell led the way to the stairs, waited while Muggsy preceded him up them.

The door at the top of the stairs was opened by the younger of the two detectives who had been at the hotel. "You made good time." He looked past Johnny to Muggsy.

Liddell scowled, turned in time to see the smile fade from Muggsy's face. "I didn't think you cared," he snapped. "Where's the body?"

"In the den." He nodded his head toward a door in the rear of the hall, managed it without taking his eyes off Muggsy. "Lieutenant's in there, too."

Muggsy led the way down the hall, Liddell followed, watched the play of her trim hips against the skirt. He had the feeling he wasn't the only one appreciating the effect.

Muggsy pushed the door open, walked into the den.

The room was a combination den and living room. Its knotty pine panelling featured framed photographs of Dirk Messner in the costumes of the various parts he had played in pictures and television.

Messner himself was making a personal appearance in a big armchair set back near a picture window that overlooked the swimming pool on the terrace and beyond that the panorama of lights that mark the outlying communities. Flashbulbs were popping as Liddell and Muggsy walked in, but Messner was paying them no heed.

He sat huddled in the armchair, his legs sprawled out stiffly in front of him. A thin dribble that ran from the corner of his mouth to the point of his jaw matched the stain that darkened the front of his white shirt. His curly hair was slightly mussed, he sat staring fixedly at the open door with unseeing eyes.

A tall man in a baggy blue suit, grey fedora pushed to the back of his head, stood behind the photographer, balled hands on his hips, legs planted widely apart. The photographer shot one more picture, lowered his camera. "That ought to do it, skipper."

The man in the blue suit nodded his head. "Good." He dropped his hands from his hips, turned around and noticed Liddell and the redhead for the first time. The perpetual frown on his face deepened.

"I'm Liddell. You sent for me."

The frown faded slightly, the man bobbed his head. "So I did." He eyed Muggsy curiously. "Your bodyguard?"

"This is Muggsy Kiely. She's out here doing some writing for Magna Studios."

"I'm Harrigan, lieutenant in Homicide, Beverly Hills." He twisted his lips in an amused grin. "One of my boys tells me you jumped him for trying to throw his weight around outside our jurisdiction." He shook his head. "Some of these guys know only one thing. You tell them you'd like to talk to someone, they only know one thing. Muscle."

"You wouldn't approve of them making like they had jurisdiction?" Liddell asked mildly.

A hurt look flashed across the lieutenant's face. "Of course not. I know where my jurisdiction ends. I wouldn't think of trying to pull something on the sheriff's home grounds. I guess Stanton got a little carried away—"

The lieutenant tore his eyes away from Muggsy, turned to study the body impassively. "He's dead. That's about all we've got for sure." He walked over to a table near the chair, picked up a pencil that had been inserted in the barrel of a snub nosed .38. "Found this next to the chair under his hand and from the looks of the hole in him the slug's a thirty-eight. So, putting two and two together, we figure this is the gun."

"Good thinking," Liddell grunted.

The lieutenant replaced the gun on the table, shrugged. "I guess you're more used to working with high powered departments in the Big City. We little fellows have to be a lot more cautious, you know?"

"Any idea of who owned the gun?"

Harrigan brought a stick of gum from his pocket, denuded it of its wrapper. "Not yet. We're working on it." He rolled the gum into a ball, popped it between his teeth.

"You say the gun was under his hand alongside the chair?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"Any chance he did the Dutch?"

"He'd have to be a contortionist to shoot himself like that. The slug went in at a ninety degree

angle, no contact burn." He considered, shook his head. "I wouldn't figure it for suicide."

"Who found the body?" Liddell wanted to know.

"His wife." The lieutenant twisted his thin lips into a grin. "You got a sweet tooth? This is a real dish, blonde and stacked."

"Do you suppose I could have a word with her?" Liddell wanted to know.

"I should have guessed it," Muggsy snorted. "Mentioning blonde and stacked in front of you is like waving a red rag in front of a bull."

"I just want to talk to her, Muggs. After all she did find the body."

"So she found the body. What do you want, a blow by blow description?"

Liddell sighed. "I came three thousand miles to do a job for Messner. He gets himself dead before I can even talk to him. Maybe his wife knows why he sent for me. You don't expect me to go back East without at least taking a stab at it."

"I'll wait in the car," Muggsy snapped. She turned, headed for the door, stopped with her hand on the knob. "By the way, lieutenant, what did you say that cute detective's name was?"

"Stanton. Harry Stanton."

She bobbed her head, smiled her thanks, walked out and slammed the door after her.

"Don't worry about your girl friend, Liddell. Stanton'll take good care of her."

Liddell pursed his lips, sighed. "That's what I'm worrying about."

V

THE VOICE THAT responded to Johnny Liddell's knock on the bedroom door was husky, exciting. The girl it belonged to, belonged to it.

Joyce Messner was tall, loosely put together, a fact that became immediately apparent when she lifted the hairbrush to the snow white hair with almost catastrophic effect on the gold colored robe. Her eyes met his in the mirror. They were slanted, green with gold flecks. Her skin was a warm nut-like color, her lips a red slash in the tan.

"Something I can do for you?" Standing there at the mirror, she looked as if she had been sculptured from milk chocolate, wrapped in gold foil, topped with a splash of marshmallow.

Liddell considered the question, enumerated all the answers he could conjure up, decided to play it cool. "I'd like to ask you a few questions, if you feel up to answering them, Mrs. Messner."

The girl studied him in the mirror. "I've told your lieutenant everything I know." She showed no resentment at the inventory he was taking of her obvious assets, con-

tinued to run the brush through her glossy hair.

"I'm not a member of the police department," Liddell told her. "I'm a private investigator from New York. Your husband sent for me."

The snow-top stopped with the brush just touching her hair, lowered her arm and turned around. "A private investigator? What would Dirk want with a private investigator?" she drowned slightly.

Liddell shrugged. "From what's happened here tonight, he probably had a pretty good idea. Obviously he was afraid of somebody or something."

Joyce Messner dropped to the stool in front of the dressing table, paid no attention to the way the gown gaped. "There are a lot of people in this town who aren't going into mourning because Dirk is dead, but I can't see any of them having the guts to do anything about it."

"And you? How'd you feel about him?"

There was a brief flash of resentment in the slanted green eyes, then she grinned. "I take it you don't read the gossip columns. Dirk and I have only been married a year and they've been rumoring us in Splitsville for over eleven months." She reached over to the table, picked a cigarette out of an antique mustache cup turned humidor. "You'll find he wasn't a very lovable character." She leaned forward to accept a light from Liddell with devastating effect on the neck of the gown.

"But you married him."

The blonde took a deep drag on the cigarette, tilted her head, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. "Before I married Dirk, I was Carroll Harten's girl. There wasn't much of a future in it. Carroll has a wife and a couple of grown daughters. When Dirk moved into television, he started coming on strong for me. If you've never had to put up with a partner double your age, you couldn't know how happy I was to trade horses."

"Harten resent it?"

Joyce considered. She lifted the cigarette from between her lips, studied the red stain of her lips. "I suppose so. No man likes to have another man move in on his private stock." She rolled her eyes up to Liddell's face. "But Dirk had something Carroll couldn't top—a ring. That made the difference. Look, mister. This is a funny town. Good looks, good shapes are a dime a dozen. You've got to have that little something extra to get by." She took a deep drag on the cigarette. "If you haven't done the casting couch bit, you have no idea how tiresome it can get. But if you want to work, you put up with it."

"That's where Harten came in."

The blonde bobbed her head. "Carroll was a producer. Out here, the producer gets first say on

casting. The director gets second say and the star gets what's left. Trading Carroll in for Dirk even-up would be a bad deal. But like I said, the ring makes the difference. This way, I don't have to do a Mamie Stover to keep working in this town."

"Have you told this to the police?"

Joyce shrugged. "They didn't ask me. Besides, they're all big boys. They know all these young chicks making the scene with the white-headed men don't all have father complexes. It's job insurance."

"You think Harten might have become jealous and—"

"Killed Dirk? Over me?" The thick lashes that fringed the slanted eyes veiled them for a minute, then she shook her head. "Why pay that kind of a price for a cow when milk is so cheap? This town is crawling with good looking kids scrambling all over each other to climb into a producer's bed." She rolled her eyes up to his face. "I should know. I went that route myself."

Joyce leaned forward, dropped her voice, "The reporters are going to have a panic with this one, Dirk ran in some important circles with people whose names sell papers. They got me to sign a statement saying the gun was on the floor, right alongside his hand. They'd like it to sound like suicide. It would let a lot of people sleep better if they could make it stick."

Liddell shook his head. "They can't. The angle was all wrong. Besides, most suicides aim for the head, not the body." He studied the girl's face. "You saw the gun. Recognize it?"

"It was just a gun. It wasn't Dirk's if that's what you mean. He never owned a gun."

Liddell walked over to the dressing table, brushed out his cigarette. His arm brushed the fullness of her shoulder, his nostrils were filled with the disturbing scent she wore. "You say a lot of big names could crop up in this one. Carroll Harten is one. Any others pop into your mind?"

"Mike Cruze, the director, had no reason to love Dirk. He was moving in on Mike's wife—not because she's a raving beauty or anything like that. Dirk just got a charge out of smashing other kids' toys. Mike has been pretending he doesn't know, but he'd have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to have seen or heard about it. Dirk enjoyed watching people squirm."

Liddell raked his fingers through his hair. "Quite a town. You mean this director would just stand by and let somebody move in on his wife without doing something about it?"

"Don't let the town throw you, Liddell. You'll get used to it just like you'll get used to the girls in it.

They're both alike—the town and the girls. A pretty face fronting an open sewer. They're both on the make if the price is right."

Joyce shrugged. "Mike's wife, like I said, is no Hollywood beauty. Rather than break up his marriage by doing something about Dirk, he stood by waiting for Dirk to get tired of the game and for his wife to come back to him. It might have happened."

"You think Mike Cruze finally got tired of waiting tonight?"

"Maybe. Or maybe Mickey Curren got tired of waiting for Dirk to make good his IOUs. Mickey has enough of them to paper his den. And Dirk couldn't buy his way out of the Automat."

"Mickey Curren? I thought they slammed the lid real tight on gambling out here? I thought the boys took a powder for Vegas when they shut down the gambling ship out in the harbor."

"Curren doesn't operate in L.A. He's strictly under county jurisdiction. No LAPD, no Beverly Hills cops. Just the sheriff's men—and some of them are real co-operative."

"How deep was Curren into your husband?"

The blonde shrugged. "I didn't tell him my troubles, he didn't tell me his. All I know is that one night one of Curren's boys had a little talk with Dirk. The next day he hocked everything that wasn't nailed down to get up some cash."

"He sure endeared himself to a lot of people."

Joyce Messner sniffed. "You want a list of the people who aren't shedding any tears over him?" She waved a manicured finger in the direction of the bulging Los Angeles telephone directory. "There's a partial list. And that doesn't even include Beverly Hills."

She leaned back in her chair, jutted her magnificent bosom against the flimsy fabric of the robe. "You going to try to find the killer?"

Liddell considered, shrugged. "I don't have a client. Your husband brought me out here but he didn't get around to giving me a fee."

"Typical of him. Look at the lengths he'd go to stiff you out of your fee."

Liddell grinned. "Does seem pretty extreme," he conceded. "You wouldn't be interested in having me run down the killer?"

She shook her head. "Isn't that a job for the police? I mean, after all, we do pay taxes."

"Just an idea." He straightened up.

She swung around on the stool, picked up her brush, resumed stroking her hair.

Liddell took the hint. He crossed to the door, and passed out into the hall, shutting it softly behind him.

As he descended the stairs, the

men from the medical examiner's office were wheeling a canvas covered stretcher to the front door. Lieutenant Harrigan was leaning against the jamb of the door to the study watching their progress. He looked up the stairs as Liddell came into view, pasted a hazy grin on his lips as the private detective headed over to where he stood.

"Talk to the widow?"

Liddell nodded, wiped a thin film of perspiration off his forehead with the side of his hand. "Quite a woman."

"Got a ride back to civilization?" Harrigan asked.

Liddell nodded. "I'll go back with the gal what brought me. I'll be checking in with you, lieutenant."

"You figuring on staying with the case?"

"Could be. Any objections?"

The lieutenant considered, stroked his lantern jaw, shook his head. "None I can see. Might even be of some help to each other."

Liddell nodded, pushed past the lieutenant, headed down the stairs to Muggsy.

VI

MUGGSY KIELY SKIDDED the Jag to a stop alongside the curb outside Glickman's Drugstore on the Strip. This is the headquarters for the aspiring newcomers and the expiring oldsters. During the late night and early morning hours, its stools might be occupied by the kooks who fell short of making the Clan, by columnists on the make for an item.

Muggsy rushed in, followed by a scowling Johnny Liddell, walked to the tier of telephones against the back wall, slid into the booth. Liddell found a stool at the end of the counter, asked the man in the starched linen jacket for a cup of coffee. He scowled at the booth where he could see Muggsy feeding a hand full of coins into the slot.

She rejoined him in five minutes, just as he was finishing a second cup of coffee.

"Jim wants to talk to you, Johnny. Hurry up.

Liddell slid off the stool, walked to the phone booth, held the receiver to his ear. "Yeah?"

"I got the basic story from Muggs, Johnny. We've been digging on this Messner character in our files ever since Muggs tipped me on the story from your place. It's pretty slim. Can you build it up for us?"

"I talked to his wife," Liddell grunted. "Blonde bombshell named Joyce. I didn't get her maiden name."

"Ryan," the receiver barked at him. "All of that's in the files. I'm not paying these rates for a rehash on my file."

"What rates? I saw Muggs dump the silver in here and—"

"Your rates," Kiely snapped. "And expenses thrown in, too. It's a hold-up, but you've got me over a barrel." There was a slight pause. "Say-y-y, you don't mean to tell me you didn't tell Muggs you'd handle the investigation for the *Dispatch,* did you?"

"Well, to tell you the truth—"

"Never mind. We want you to crack the killing for the *Dispatch.* Muggs will work with you and she can handle filing the copy. That okay with you?"

Kiely grunted. "My own daughter does it to me, yet. Okay, now give. You questioned the wife. She give you anything?"

"Yeah. A couple of possibles. There's a producer named Carroll Harten. Messner's wife used to play house with Carroll and Dirk took her away. He's also messing around with the wife of his director, guy named Cruze. Mike Cruze."

There was a pause. "Got it. Anything else?"

"Yeah, an old friend of yours lifts his evil head. Messner was into Mickey Curren for a bundle according to the wife. As I remember the Mick, he tends to get narrow minded when anybody owes him money."

"Wonderful!" Jim Kiely chortled.

Liddell could visualize the editor dry washing his hands with glee while the rewrite man scribbled the names on copy paper.

"I've got nothing to back any of this up, yet," Liddell cautioned him. "So don't bring in any names until I have a chance to check them out."

There was a note of disappointment in Kiely's voice. "But Johnny—"

"Look, you're getting a scoop on the killing. It won't be announced here until the morning. By then it'll be noon in New York and you'll have it hours before the home town papers."

"Okay, I'll sit on it for awhile. But I want to keep out in front. I expect fresh stuff and I expect it exclusive. And with names!"

"Okay, okay."

There was a click on the other end. Liddell dropped the receiver on its hook, pushed open the phone booth door, confronted a grinning redhead.

"Did he buy the deal?" she wanted to know.

"Lock, stock and barrel. Is it all right for me to ask what you sold me down the river for?"

"A hundred a day and expenses. Including what you spend on me," Muggsy said. "I told him you'd give him the name of the killer in time for them to have it on the wire when the police announce it."

Liddell groaned, clapped the flat of his hand to his forehead. "That's all?"

"I have a lot of faith in you, Johnny."

The following morning Lieutenant Harrigan sat behind the oversized desk in his office in headquarters, chewed on a wad of gum with absorption.

"You should have told me the redhead was a reporter," he rebuked Liddell sadly. "How do you think the local sheets felt about getting a goose from the wire services asking for details on a Hollywood murder some New York paper broke hours before? And the local boys didn't even know what they were talking about."

Liddell shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair. "Don't blame me. Those two bright boys you sent to my apartment last night were in the room when she gave the story to her father."

"It makes things a little difficult. I was thinking we might be able to work together. But with this—" He gestured to a pile of telephone messages on his desk. "I got everybody from my boss to the copy boy at the *Examiner* on my neck over the leak."

"It could have been worse," Liddell said. "I made Jim Kiely promise not to use any of the names involved in this mess until I had a chance to check them out. If I'm not going to be working with you, he might as well break them right now—"

"Names?" Harrigan asked. "What names?"

"Well, for instance it might make a good story about how Joyce Messner was Carroll Harten's playmate until Dirk moved in on her and cut Harten out. The old triangle bit. Always sells papers. And there's Mickey Curren."

"Leave Curren out of it," Harrigan said.

"Why? Messner was into him pretty good. The Mick had him worked over one night and Messner got the message. He came up with a bundle. But he still owes plenty."

"Look, Liddell. Curren isn't a small time hood any more. It used to be we could pick him up every time he spit on the sidewalk. But he's got friends now and he's got influence." He shook his head. "Unless you're in a position to pin it on him, but good, leave him out of it."

"So you pick him up for running a gambling joint."

"He doesn't operate in our town. He operates in the county. He'd have my men thrown out of his joint if they tried to pick him up out there. And the sheriff would back him up." He leaned forward, picked a flimsy out of the basket. "Besides, we've identified the gun. And we don't know of any way Curren could have gotten his hands on it." He pushed the flimsy across the desk to Liddell.

Johnny picked up the report, glanced through it, looked up. "It

came from the Magna prop room?"

Harrigan nodded without missing a beat on the gun. "So that changes the picture a bit."

"So we go back to Carroll Harten. Have you had him in yet?"

Harrigan picked up the paper, dropped it back in his basket. "This is a funny town, Liddell," the lieutenant said. "You move slowly. The people involved in this case are important people, with important contacts."

Liddell stared at him. "Do you whitewash them? That it?"

Harrigan cut him short with a gesture. "We don't whitewash anybody. But we take care not to smear anybody by jumping to conclusions, either. It's just that we've got to be extra careful in a town like this where everybody's name is headline bait."

Liddell bobbed his head. "Figures."

The lieutenant squinted at him. "So now you know why I'm hesitating about co-operating with you any further. We don't want a lot of half baked theories being fed the press."

"Maybe one way to make sure that doesn't happen is to co-operate with me," Liddell said. "That way you could be sure I'd be checking everything I dug up through you."

"Could I?"

"You can check me out with the New York boys. They'll tell you that if you level with me, I'll level with you."

"I already have," Harrigan said. "When I got the flash that you were working on this case for the *Dispatch,* I contacted Homicide West in New York. Talked to an inspector named Herlehy. He said you weren't the most orthodox operator he ever met, but that you levelled. Made me feel a little better."

"Herlehy never had any reason to regret working with me. You won't have, either."

The lieutenant considered, nodded. "Okay, I'll take a chance. We did have a little talk with Harten. He admits there was no love lost between him and Messner. He was producing a teevee series with Messner doing the lead. Messner was giving him a hard time by stalling. The series was away off schedule and stood a good chance of blowing its sponsor."

"What happened if anything happened to Messner?"

Harrigan laced his fingers at the back of his neck, leaned back and hooked his heel on the corner of the desk. "There was insurance on the series. A million dollar policy."

Liddell whistled softly.

"It started as a publicity gag, to give the series stature, you know?" Harrigan continued. "But it was strictly a six month deal. Now the insurance people are in a

good spot to shell out a million."

"What more do you want on Harten? He had access to the gun in the Magna prop room, he hates Messner's guts and if anything happens to Messner, the company gets its money back plus from the insurance and Harten walks away from a turkey. And he's still walking around?"

Harrigan grinned mirthlessly. "I forgot to tell you he has an alibi. Can prove where he was all of last night."

"Where?"

"He spent most of the night with a woman. A married woman, wife of a big star. Could be an awful mess if we start stirring things up and it turns out he does have an unbreakable alibi."

"What do you mean if? Haven't you had the woman in to back up his story? Or does he just waltz in here, shyly admit he was with some unnamed married woman and that gets him off the hook?" Liddell asked hotly.

Harrigan looked sad. "He's not off the hook. Like I said, we move slowly. There are a couple of other things we're looking into. After we've checked out the other possibilities, we may be coming back to Harten."

Liddell snorted, pulled himself to his feet. "In the meantime, do you mind if I have a look around on my own?"

Harrigan fumbled in the drawer, came up with a fresh pack of gum. He slit it open, selected a slice. "Couldn't stop you if I wanted to. Not if you were doing your looking around in the county or in L.A. proper." He denuded the gun of its wrapper, stuck it between his teeth. "Out of our jurisdiction, you know?" He leaned back, stared at Liddell placidly. "Where were you figuring on looking?"

"Out on the lot where they were shooting the series."

"Makes sense. You kind of think Harten killed Messner, huh?"

"Somebody did," Liddell grunted. "They're getting ready to bury him on Wednesday."

The lieutenant nodded, "Somebody did, of course. Point I was making is that we take it slow. We learned an awful lot a long time ago when a director named Taylor got himself killed."

Harrigan dropped into his chair. "Never did get the killer, but an awful lot of important people were ruined by the way it was handled."

Liddell stared at him for a moment. "Okay, so your job is to keep the lid on. Mine's to blow it off. I'll be seeing you, Harrigan." He turned, stamped to the door, slammed it after him.

VII

THE PROPERTY ROOM of Magna Studio was housed in a one-story building around the corner from

the writers' bungalows. It was almost lost among the towering sound stages that lined the road connecting the entrance gate with the actors' dressing rooms.

Muggsy Kiely led the way to the door of the prop room and into the dimness of the building. She headed past racks of costumes of all periods that lined one full wall toward the studio arsenal. A tall, thin man was checking a row of western holsters hanging from pegs in the wall as she walked up. He looked up, frowned at the intrusion.

"Now, look, lady. If you want to see about the holsters—"

"We're not interested in holsters," Muggsy said. "This officer wants to talk to the prop man on the Jerry Blake show."

A distressed look creased the thin man's face. "First them Beverly Hill cops come around asking questions. And now you."

Liddell fished his badge from his pocket, gave the prop man a fleeting look at it. "Suppose you tell us."

"What's to tell? The other day when we broke for lunch, Mike Cruze tells us to stand by, we might be shooting after lunch."

"Might be shooting? I thought the show was behind schedule."

The prop man shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Dirk is in a nasty mood. Real nasty. He walked off the set, locked himself in his dressing room. I didn't see Dirk again. He must have left while I was out having lunch. When I hear there's no shooting, I collect the guns from the others, lock them up. That's when I find out Dirk's gone and took his gun with him."

"He took the gun with him? You're sure?"

"Who can be sure? All I know is I checked his dressing room real good and it's not there. I don't have it."

Liddell and Muggsy exchanged glances. "What'd you do then?" Liddell wanted to know.

"I went over to Mike Cruze and complained about Messner walking off with my gun. Mike told me to get lost, he had problems of his own with Dirk. The next thing I know, this cop waltzes in this morning with a serial number. We check it against my list and it turns out to be the gun Dirk walked off with."

"You have any trouble with Messner?" Liddell asked abruptly.

"Me?" The thin man shook his head. "I wasn't important enough for him to fight with. I can count the number of times he even talked to me since we been on the series."

"Who else did he have any real trouble with?"

"It's no big secret. Mac Gold, one of the stunt men on the series, has been building up a real hate for Dirk on account he doesn't pull his punches, he roughs the

boys up more than he needs." He paused to clear his throat with a bark. "So the other day when Messner deliberately kicks him in the belly during a stunt throw, Mac swings on him. Nearly breaks his jaw."

There was an unsuccessfully disguised note of satisfaction in his voice. "Cruze kicked Mac off the lot and Mac said he'd be looking for Dirk on the outside."

Liddell took a pad from his pocket, scribbled the name "Mac Gold" on it. "Any idea where I can find this Mac Gold?"

"He's probably registered with casting. Cruze or his assistant might know, too."

"Okay. Thanks for your time."

Liddell took Muggsy by the elbow, steered her back into the blinding sunshine of the street. The extras were gone from in front of the building, a rotating red light outside the door to Stage 11 indicated they were trying for a take.

"Harrigan knew when he was talking to me that gun came from the prop room here at the studio," Liddell growled.

"You think Dirk took the gun home with him and loaded it to use as muscle if the stunt man did come after him?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"I didn't ask you if it makes sense. I asked you if you think that's what happened." She studied his face. "I've got an idea something's percolating in that skull of yours. What made you ask him about Mike Cruze?"

"I didn't. He brought Cruze up."

"Don't go cute on me, Liddell," the redhead snapped. "The only one in town who wasn't talking about how hard Dirk was coming on for Cruze's wife was Mike himself. He pretended like he didn't know a thing about it, but he'd have to be deaf and blind not to."

"And it occurs to you that maybe Mike Cruze found the gun where Messner left it when he walked out of the studio and it gave him an idea, that it?"

"It could happen like that. And apparently I'm not the only one who got that idea. Looks to me like Lieutenant Harrigan has pretty much the same idea. So he suckers you into talking to the prop man instead of telling you he had traced the gun."

"Why?"

"So you'll do his work for him over here where he has no jurisdiction. If you clear Cruze, then Dirk brought the gun home with him and it could have been Mickey Curren and one of his boys. Or maybe this stunt man took the gun away from him and started to feed it back, one slug at a time."

"And what will he be doing in the meantime?"

Muggsy grinned. "If I know my Harrigans, and I do, he'll be doing a first class job of leading the press up a blind alley and keeping them

away from this end of it where all the headlines are. Come on, let's go to the commissary. I think Mike Cruze should be there now."

The commissary at Magna Studio was a huge, brightly lighted room that was divided into roughly three sections. There was service at the counters, there was an area where the tables had no cloths, and beyond an area for more leisurely dining, with glistening silver and white cloths.

Muggsy Kiely led the way through the closely packed tables in the outer area, headed for the back section of the room where the tables were covered. In the far corner of the room there was a small circular table. It was occupied by the man they had hoped to find somewhere in the commissary.

"I had a feeling he'd be here, if anywhere," Muggsy said. "He usually dines in this section."

Mike Cruze saw them, and stood up.

"Johnny Liddell, Mike Cruze," Muggsy made the necessary introductions.

The director thrust out his hand, enveloped Liddell's with a firm grip, dropped it. "Miss Kiely tells me Dirk Messner sent to New York for you. Something about being afraid for his life?" he asked curiously.

"That's right."

Liddell indicated a chair, waited until Muggsy and the director were seated, dropped back onto his chair. "It's a little late to keep anyone from killing him, but I intend to find out who did it."

"I see." Cruze brought his pipe out from his pocket, absently fumbled for his tobacco pouch. "I think by now you must know that very few people in this town feel any acute loss. I'd be an awful hypocrite if I were to say I hope you catch the one who did it."

"Especially if present company isn't excepted."

The director stuck the pipe between his teeth, chewed on the stem for a moment. "Meaning that I'm under suspicion?" He considered it for a moment, bobbed his head. "Makes sense, I guess."

Liddell grinned. "This is all hypothetical, of course." He waited until the director nodded. "But the fact that you had access to the gun—"

A genuinely surprised look creased Cruze's forehead. "I did?"

"You knew it hadn't been returned to the prop room. The prop man told you Messner had left without turning it in. If he left it behind, you could have found it. If he didn't leave it behind, you knew that he had it with him and could have planned to make it look like a suicide by shooting him with his own gun."

"And my motive?"

Liddell pursed his lips. "For one thing, Messner was apparently

determined to delay your shooting on the series. My understanding is that if you didn't finish by a set date, you stood to lose the sponsor. Maybe, just as the director, you'd have less to lose than Harten. But your reputation, at least, was at stake."

Cruze rattled the juice in his pipestem, grinned ruefully. "Would that be a strong enough motive for killing him?"

Liddell flashed a look at the director. "Talk is you had other, maybe better reason for hating Messner."

"Hating him, yes. But not killing him." He broke off while the waitress stopped at the table, accepted an order for a round of drinks, then shuffled off. "You're referring, of course, to the fact that Dirk Messner was having an affair with my wife?"

"Men have killed for less than that."

As soon as the waitress was out of earshot, Cruze squinted at Liddell. "This is really none of your business, Liddell. But then, maybe in a way it is your business. I knew about my wife and Messner. I've known all along. But I didn't do anything about it because I knew she'd be coming back to me when she really saw him for the louse he was."

"You could stand by and not do anything about it?" Muggsy wanted to know.

"I happen to love my wife, Miss Kiely. I wanted her so much I was willing to share her to keep her." He looked up at Muggsy. "Not much of a man, huh?"

She shook her head. "In my book, quite a man," she said.

Johnny Liddell pursed his lips. "Where were you last night?"

The director grinned glumly. "You're a little late asking that question. The police have already asked it. I spent the evening at home with my wife. I believe by now they've already checked it with her." Mike Cruze picked up his glass, took a deep swallow. "Anything else I can tell you?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "You can tell me about Mac Gold."

"He's a good stunt man. That's all I know about him."

"Messner had you bar him from the lot, didn't he?"

The director dropped his eyes to the pipe he was holding. "There was some disagreement. I don't rightly know how serious it was."

"It was serious enough for Gold to threaten to get even and for Messner to stage a sit down strike on the series."

Cruze drew a deep breath, looked up. "You're so well informed, why ask me?"

"Know where I can find Gold?"

The director stared at him levelly. "No. And if I did know, I wouldn't tell you."

"Like that, huh?"

"Let me put it more bluntly. If

I saw somebody standing over Messner's hot corpse with a smoking gun in his hand, I wouldn't tell you or anybody else about it." He picked up his water glass, drained it. "I thought I was hungry. I guess I was wrong." He nodded to Muggsy. "Be seeing you around, Miss Kiely." He stood up, headed back through the tables toward the exit.

Muggsy remained silent for a moment. Then she said, "You wanted to talk to Mac Gold. If there's one guy on a production who knows where to lay his hands on people at a moment's notice, it's the assistant director. Cruze's assistant will probably know where to locate Mac Gold. That is, if Mac hasn't taken off for Mexico already."

VIII

THE ASSISTANT director was standing with a group behind the camera on the sound stage where they were shooting "Covered Wagon Trail" when Muggsy and Johnny Liddell walked in. On the set, the cast was being shuffled through a dry run of a scene.

"I'm looking for Bill Evers," Liddell told the script girl who sat on the perimeter of the group, checking the dialogue as the cast rehearsed.

She raised her pencil, pointed to a short, fat man with a baseball hat perched on the back of his head. He was standing, listening to a discussion between the director and electrician over the lighting of the set.

Liddell walked over, tapped the fat man on the shoulder. "You Bill Evers?"

The fat man transferred his attention to Liddell, then to a survey of Muggsy. He seemed to like what he saw, looked her over from head to foot with appreciative stops in between. "Yeah," he said.

"I'm Ronny Kiely. Pick up the phone and ask the front office who I am, if you have any doubt about it. This is Johnny Liddell, a private detective from New York. He's working on the Dirk Messner murder."

"He's too late," Evers grunted. "Someone beat him to it."

Liddell brought his hand out of his pocket, a folded bill between his fingers, the denomination showing. "I thought maybe we could have a little talk."

The fat man studied the bill, pursed his lips, blew bubbles in the center of them. "Just what would the talk be about?"

"I want to find Mac Gold."

The fat man squinted at Liddell. "You got some kind of crazy idea it was Mac chilled him?"

"Perhaps. Where can I find him?"

"Not on this lot. Cruze had him barred for taking a poke at the prince." He stuck the bill in his watch pocket, brought a memo

book from his shirt pocket, riffled through the pages. He stopped at one, squinted at the scribbling. "He's got a pad over on Figueroa. One eighty-six B."

He closed the book, returned it to his pocket. "One thing, buddy. When you handle Mac, handle him gentle. He's got a short fuse. And now, if you'll excuse me."

A moment later Liddell and Muggsy were heading back to where Liddell had his convertible parked outside her bungalow.

"You going up against Mac Gold?" Muggsy asked.

"Might as well check him out."

She stopped alongside his car, waited while he slipped behind the wheel. "Take it easy with the stunt man, Johnny. I'm kind of used to your face the way it is. I'd hate to have someone re-arrange it."

Twenty minutes later, Johnny Liddell climbed the steps of One eighty-six B Figueroa, knocked on the door. The door was opened a crack, he had the impression of a woman standing behind it. "What do you want?"

"My name's Liddell. I want to talk to Mac Gold."

There was a slight pause, then the door swung slowly open. A girl stood in the doorway. "Come in," she said.

She stepped aside, waited until he was in the combination living room-bedroom, then closed the door after him. "You'll have to excuse the looks of the place."

The disarranged bedclothes on the day bed against the wall testified to a restless night.

"Who are you?" she wanted to know.

"I'm a private detective. Dirk Messner sent for me. He wanted protection from somebody or something. I got here too late. Now I want to find who it was that killed him."

"It wasn't Mac, mister. He talks tough and he's quick with his hands. But he wouldn't kill anybody."

"When did you see your husband last."

"Mac and I aren't married. I—I was having it pretty tough and he told me I could stay here until I got back on my feet." She dry washed her hands. "My name is Myrna Farrell."

"Mine's Liddell. Johnny Liddell. Why don't you sit down? You look a little rocky, Myrna."

The girl bobbed her head. "I haven't been doing much sleeping." She walked over to a chair, dropped into it gratefully. "I've looked for him everywhere, Mr. Liddell. I don't know where else to look."

Liddell frowned at her. "How long is it since you saw him?"

"Two nights ago. The night he had the trouble at the studio. He was like a crazy man. Did you know they barred him from the

Magna lot? All because of that rat Messner?" She reached up, smoothed her hair back with the flat of her hand. "Then, this morning when the news came out that Messner had been murdered—" She broke off, shook her head helplessly. "He didn't do it. I know he didn't."

"If you want to help him, help me to get to him before the police do."

"He always works out at Morton's Gym on Santa Monica. Sometimes he's at a bar on McCadden. Mario's, I think the name of it is. It's a sort of a queer joint."

Liddell raised his eyebrows.

The girl shook her head. "Mac isn't like that. It's just that the people who hang out there go for the muscular type like Mac. When he's on a bender and running low on money, he sometimes ends up there. There's always somebody there who'll keep the drinks coming."

Liddell added the name of the bar to his scribbled notes. "How about a car?" he asked. "Does he own one?"

She nodded. "He has a fifty-five Ford convertible. But he never takes it when he's on a toot." She paused, then said: "The landlady told me this morning to get out. She's mean and suspicious and doesn't want me to stay another day."

Liddell was studying her closely. "What are you going to do?"

The girl's shoulders sagged. "I don't know. I have no place to go. I can't stay here, that's for sure."

Liddell pulled a roll of bills from his pocket, separated two twenties and a ten. "Find yourself a room."

She looked from the bills to his face, shook her head. "You don't understand, Mr. Liddell. Just because I moved in here with Mac, that doesn't mean—"

He grinned at her. "No strings. Just a loan. You can pay it back later."

"Sorry. I guess I should have known a man like you doesn't have to buy his women." She took the bills.

"How long will it take you to get ready? I have a car outside. I can give you a lift."

The girl looked around the apartment. "Not long. There's not much to pack. I could be ready in five minutes."

"I'll wait." He walked over to his chair, dropped into it. He fumbled through his pockets, came up with a cigarette, lit it. He was almost finished with it when he heard heavy footsteps on the outside stairs just as Myrna Farrell returned.

The door to the stairway slammed open, the doorway was filled with a uniformed policeman, gun in hand.

"Hold it, mister," the cop motioned with his gun. "You'd never

make it. Bring that hand out real slow. And empty."

Behind him, an old lady in a kimona with red-rimmed eyes was peering over the cop's shoulder.

"Your precious Mr. Gold is wanted by the police!" she shrilled. "Don't think I don't listen to the radio. This man is an underworld character, too. I'm sure of it. Better see if he has a gun, officer."

Liddell brought his hand out. "The lady's nuts, officer. I wear a gun but I have a license for it."

"Turn around and face the wall. Keep your hands right where I can see them," the cop snapped. When Liddell was facing the wall, "Now put the flat of your hand against the wall and keep walking backwards until I tell you to stop."

"All right," Liddell growled. "Frisk me and get it over with. You'll find my papers in my breast pocket. I'm a licensed private detective working with Lieutenant Harrigan of Beverly Hills."

The policeman slid his arm around Liddell, lifted his wallet from his pocket. He flipped through the credentials, looked up, scowled at the old lady. "These look to be in order. You say you're working with Harrigan at Beverly Hills?"

Liddell bobbed his head.

"I'd better check Harrigan first." The policeman walked over to the telephone, dialled with quick flicks of his forefinger. He waited for a moment, then when the voice answered from the other end, "Give me Lieutenant Harrigan." After a moment, "Lieutenant, this is Officer Nick Long, LAPD. I have a man here named Liddell. Says he's working with you." He looked over to where Liddell stood. "In the apartment of Mac Gold, the guy you have the APB out on."

Long nodded his head. "His credentials check out all right. It's just that the landlady thought—" He was interrupted by a metallic chatter from the other end. "Okay, Lieutenant. Right away." He slammed down the receiver. "Okay, Liddell. Lieutenant says you're okay."

The landlady made a futile effort to recapture her dignity. "I told that woman this morning I want her out of here and I demand that you get her out, officer."

"Don't worry, lady," Liddell said. "She's going." He walked over, stood in front of the old lady. "But before we go, can I tell you one thing? You throw the most wonderful going away parties!"

IX

MORTON'S GYM stared out at the steady stream of trucks that rumble along Santa Monica day and night through two large, dusty plate glass windows set in the second story of a five-story building.

Johnny Liddell found parking for the convertible a half block from the pool parlor, walked back.

A thin man in a sleeveless sweater was perched on a high stool behind a glass case displaying cigarettes and open boxes of cigars. Liddell walked over to him. The man scowled his annoyance at the interruption and studied Johnny with runny eyes. He kept wiping the tip of his nose with his finger.

"I'm looking for Mac Gold," Liddell said.

The man on the stool squinted, shook his head. "Last time I seen him, he was working out a routine with Artie Mays for that Jerry Blake turkey. Pretty simple bit, but it had to go right the first time. Supposed to take half the set with him when he went through the window."

"You haven't seen him since then?"

The gym operator stared at Liddell, swivelled his head. "All I hear is that he's out of work, and this Messner creep got himself killed."

"No matter how much of a creep a guy is, the law gets a little narrow-minded about somebody taking it on himself to kill him," Liddell said.

The gym operator stared at him. "You for real? Are you trying to tell me Mac Gold killed Messner?" He reached down into his wastebasket, brought up a

crumpled copy of the early edition of the afternoon paper. "It says here Messner stopped a thirty-eight." He smoothed the wrinkled paper out on his desk, jabbed at the headline story with a stubby forefinger. "You think if Mac decides to take this guy apart he'd use a gun?"

He held up two heavily corded, clenched hands. "This is how he'd have done it. With his hands."

"If he has nothing to worry about, why's he hiding out?"

"Who says he's hiding out?"

"A girl named Myrna Farrell. She was kicked out because the old lady heard a news flash saying that Mac Gold was wanted for questioning in the Messner kill. I helped her move. She's at the Dresden Hotel on Fairfax now. Room eighty-two, if you'd like to check. And in case you hear from Mac, tell him I might be able to help him—but I can't help him if I can't talk to him."

"I told you I don't know where he is. If I hear from him, he'll get your message."

Liddell stood up. "I'll check with you tomorrow night," he said. He walked toward the door, opened it, went out.

Outside in his convertible Johnny consulted his scribbled notes for the name and address of the bar where Myrna Farell told him Mac Gold also hung out.

Mario's Hideaway was on the left hand side of the street, halfway up the block to Yucca, where Fatsy D'Amore's Villa Capri squats, staring impassively down toward the tide of traffic that ebbs and flows twenty-four hours a day along Hollywood Boulevard.

A half dozen men leaning against the bar turned and studied Liddell with interest as he stood in the entrance, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. He walked up to the bar, waited while the bartender went through the motions of drying the bar with a damp rag.

"What'll it be?"

Liddell looked quickly at the man behind the bar. He was almost six two, his hair was thick and wavy, his jaw full and heavy. His eyes were buttressed by soft looking bags. He might have fooled Liddell in other surroundings, but here the petulance of his lips, the wavering eyes were a giveaway.

"Scotch on the rocks."

He watched while the bartender made a production of reaching for a bottle on the back shelf. He spilled a jigger full over a couple of pieces of ice, slid it across the bar.

Liddell sipped at his drink, approved. He squinted around the room, discovered there were a few females scattered among the rear tables although the clientele was predominantly male. He turned his attention back to the men that lined the bar. The one nearest him, who had been eyeing him covertly, dropped his eyes back to his drink. He became completely absorbed in twirling it around the inside of his glass.

The man at the bar was severely Ivy League. Narrow lapels, a close fitting jacket with natural shoulders, pants so tight that he looked as if he had been dipped in a bottle of ink from the waist down. They were in perfect tune with the crew cut, the tab collared gray shirt with a narrow blue and gold barred tie.

Liddell drained his glass, set it back on the bar. He tried without success to catch the eye of the bartender. He caught the eye of Crew Cut on him.

Crew Cut held his glass up. "Your health." He took a swallow, studied Liddell over the rim. When he set the glass back on the bar, he made concentric circles with the wet bottom. "I haven't seen you in here before?"

"I'm just in from the East. Name's Johnny Liddell." He dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, tilted it until several extended, held it out to Crew Cut.

"I don't smoke," he shook his head. "I'm particular about my vices." He watched Liddell stick one in the corner of his mouth. "I'm Leonard Thrall. I'm originally from the East, but I'm out here doing some television."

Liddell looked impressed. "You're an actor?"

Thrall shook his head. "No, as a matter of fact, I'm not. I do make-up." Before Liddell could comment, he hastened to add, "It's a terribly important part of making a film, you know." He rolled his eyes upward. "If they ever came through that tube looking the way they do before we have a chance to take care of them—" His tone implied complete disaster.

"I imagine it must be very important. You wouldn't happen to know that television star who was murdered last night? I've been reading about it."

Leonard took a deep swallow from his glass. His color was higher, he'd lost some of his shyness, his eyes were bolder. "There's a lot I know that I'm not telling," he hinted. "You know, television is like one big family. A lot goes on behind the scenes that the public never gets to know."

"Then you did know him?"

Crew Cut considered it, finally shook his head reluctantly. "Not exactly. But I could tell you loads about him nonetheless. There's a friend of mine comes here sometimes who knew him quite well." He took a careful swallow from his glass. "He was a stunt man." He made an ineffectual effort to describe broad shoulders without removing his elbows from his sides. "Huge. All muscle." The voice dropped to a whisper. "He told me once he'd like to tear Messner limb from limb. And he could have done it."

"What's he say about Messner being dead? I'll bet he was surprised."

A slight frown marred the placidity of Crew Cut's forehead. "I don't know. I haven't seen him in days. He hasn't been around. But Messner's wife has. And she doesn't seem terribly upset."

"Messner's wife?"

Ivy League turned his back to the bar, shielded his eyes with a cupped hand, squinted into the

dimness of the interior room. "Matter of fact, I think she's back there at a table right now." He turned to Liddell, grinned roguishly. "She has a little friend here. Drops by very often to see her."

Liddell tried to peer into the interior, could not spot the snow white hair of the dead man's wife. "You sure it's Messner's wife? Why, it was only last night—"

"There was no love lost there, believe me." Leonard tilted his head closer to Liddell. "You know the old story—those mixed marriages never last."

Liddell dug a roll of bills from his pocket, separated three of them, dropped them on the bar. "I'll see you around," he told Crew Cut.

He pushed past him, aware of the startled eyes of the Ivy Leaguer on his back, headed into the dimness of the booth-lined interior room.

In the far corner, he found them. The reason he hadn't been able to spot the silver hair was apparent from close. She was wearing a black mantilla, was sitting, talking confidentially to a girl with short hair, a blouse open at the neck. There was a bottle and two glasses in front of them. Neither of them looked up as he stopped at the table.

"Well, well. Fancy meeting you here."

The short-haired girl looked up with a scowl of annoyance. Joyce Messner took her time about looking up. When she recognized him, the full lips split into a grin.

"We do meet in the strangest places," her husky voice intoned. "Pull up a chair and sit down." She frowned at him as he drew a chair to the table. "I know your name is Johnny. Johnny what?"

"Liddell."

The short-haired girl crushed out her cigarette in an ash tray with angry little jabs. "Look, friend, if you just dropped by to say hello, you've already said it. Why don't you say goodbye now and hit the road?"

The snow top leaned back in her chair, grinned contentedly. "Bobby's jealous, Liddell. You've never met Bobby. She used to be the script girl on the Jerry Blake series. You want to know something about my dear departed husband, ask Bobby. She'll tell you."

The girl with the short hair rested her elbows on the table, thrust her face at Liddell. "Look, friend, your kind isn't welcome in here. Nobody sent for you. Why don't you just get out of here before somebody puts you on wheels and wheels you out?"

"Why don't you?" Liddell suggested. "You look kind of talked out."

Bobby started to get up from her chair.

"Don't bother, Bobby," Joyce told her. "I was just about to leave anyway. And Liddell can give me a

lift to my place." She studied Johnny from under tinted eyelids. "Okay?"

The short-haired girl sank back in her chair.

"Let's go," Liddell said. He kicked back his chair, stood up. Joyce Messner swept past him, headed for the door. Back at the table, the short-haired girl tilted the bottle over her glass, took a deep swallow. She coughed as the liquor seared its way down, took another swallow.

At the bar, the Ivy Leaguer stared after Liddell's departing back, and shook his head sadly.

X

JOHNNY LIDDELL headed the convertible west on Hollywood Boulevard, turned left on LaBrea to Sunset, then bore west again toward Beverly Hills. Alongside him, Joyce Messner had taken off the mantilla, sat with her head propped back against the cushion, letting the breeze gently rumple her hair.

"How'd you ever get on this kick?" Liddell grunted finally.

The blonde rolled her head to the side lazily, studied his profile. "I guess I was always on it. I just didn't know it until I got to know Bobby from visiting Dirk on the set. She started introducing me around to the crowd at Mario's and I finally found out where I belonged."

"But a sexy looking chick like you—" He shook his head. "I don't dig."

Joyce rolled her head back into position, stared up at the sky. "This is Hollywood, Liddell. Everything has a false front. Sexy?" She considered for a moment, shook her head. "To me, sex is a number that comes after five and before seven. Sure, I'd go the sex route, but with me it was either an audition or to get something I wanted.

"And all the time I hated the guts of the guy, sneered at him inside for being taken in by a tired old routine of bumps, grinds and groans. I laughed at him thinking he was getting something for nothing. He wasn't getting a thing because I had nothing to give."

"But something like this Bobby —that's different?"

The blonde was silent for a moment, then she shrugged. "I guess so. At least I know her, I know what she is. All I know about a man is that he's something to get something from—security, a job, money—somebody to take something from and to despise because he's lower than I am." She shrugged. "I guess you can't understand that."

Liddell thought it over. "No, I can't. But let's talk about something a little more concrete. I've been trying to locate Mac Gold, the stunt man your husband had trouble with. I got word he likes to

make the scene at Mario's. Finding you there came as a distinct shock."

"Mac used to drop around whenever he was broke," the blonde nodded. "A lot of the muscle characters make it when they're short on spending money. The regulars have plenty of loot and they're glad to spend it on guys like Mac." She straightened up on the seat, brushed a few stray tendrils of hair from her face. "You really think Mac killed him?"

"I don't know. I've never even seen the guy. You know him. What do you think?"

Joyce shrugged. "He could get real mean when he was loaded. He used to rough up some of the boys at Mario's just for kicks." She opened her bag, fumbled around, brought up two cigarettes. "It's for sure that Dirk didn't make him a lifetime pal by getting him barred from the studio."

She lit the two cigarettes, put one between Liddell's lips. "I hear the police had Carroll in for a Truth and Consequence session this morning."

"Where'd you hear that?"

She grinned at him. "There aren't too many secrets in this town. How'd he make out?"

Liddell shrugged. "Far as I know he has an alibi for the time of the shooting. He was with a married woman."

Joyce shook her head humorously. "One thing you've got to say for Carroll. He keeps trying. Who was the lucky woman?"

"Harrigan wasn't giving out any names. She won't be brought into it if she backs Harten's story."

"That's what I like about Beverly Hills taxes. You pay more, they care more." She took the cigarette from between her lips, studied the carmined end. "How about Mike Cruze?"

Liddell scowled. "I had a talk with Cruze. He has an alibi, too. He was sitting at home with his wife."

The blonde raised her eyebrows, replaced the cigarette between her lips. "That so?"

Liddell stole a glance at the girl's face. "Why do you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you knew something different."

Joyce took a deep drag on the cigarette. The wind picked up the smoke as it dribbled from her lips, whisked it away. "Rita Cruze was with Dirk last night."

"You're sure of that?"

Joyce shrugged. "Why should I make it up? He told me himself she was coming over. That's why I got out." She turned, grinned at him. "And if you want to know where I went, there were a dozen people in Mario's last night who'll remember I was there."

Liddell bobbed his head absently. "If Cruze is lying—" He squinted thoughtfully at the road.

"An alibi like that works two ways. It covers her as well as it covers him."

"Why should Rita kill Dirk? Mike was the one holding the dirty end of the stick."

"He admits he knew about Dirk and his wife. But he claims he was just waiting for her to realize she had a no-goodnik by the tail. He didn't want to do anything that would make it tough for her to come back to him when she turned Messner out to pasture."

"Out to stud is more like it," Joyce said.

Liddell studied her profile. "You knew about Dirk and the Cruze woman. How'd you feel about it?"

"You kidding? The more time he spent with other women, the less I had to put up with him."

"Figures. How about Mickey Curren? He wasn't president of the Sunset Strip Dirk Messner Fan Club."

The girl shrugged. "I already told you. Dirk owed him some money. Mickey reminded him the only way Dirk understood." She glanced idly at Liddell. "You're not thinking of dragging the Mick into this, are you? He's awful narrow-minded about people who get him bad publicity."

Liddell snorted. "Curren publicity shy? That'd be the day."

Joyce raised her eyebrows. "You know him?"

"Knew him in the old days when he was operating in New York." He took a last drag on his cigarette, flipped it out into the road. "He came out here when he heard Buggsy Siegel was making it so big. But he wasn't in the Bug's class."

"You haven't seen Mickey in a long time, then. He's come a long way in the past few years and he's not about to stand still for anybody to send him back."

"I intend to have a little talk with him," Liddell said, "just as I plan to have a talk with Mac Gold as soon as I can flush him out into the open." He glanced over at the girl. "Did you know they identified the gun that killed your husband?"

The blonde flashed him a startled glance. "Whose was it?"

"It belonged to the property department at Magna. It was a prop they used in the Jerry Blake series."

"Then they think it was somebody connected with the studio—Carroll, Mike or even Mac Gold?"

"Possibly. Or maybe your husband brought the gun home himself for protection against Mac Gold or Curren or whoever it was that killed him." He returned his attention to the road. "Don't forget that he figured he was in danger, or he wouldn't have sent for me. He must have had some hint this could happen."

"But if he had the gun—"

"The killer might have had one

of his own, taken Messner's and killed him with it. Or he may have taken the gun away from him in a struggle and used it on him. There are any number of ways it could have happened."

"I see."

The convertible left the broad roadway of the Strip, swung onto the narrow two lane road with its separating island of shrubbery and flowers that heralds its entry into Beverly Hills.

Joyce sat silent, watched the discreetly screened houses flash by.

Liddell reached the end of the road, swung into the concrete apron in front of the garage. "Okay, Joyce, here we are."

"Coming in?"

Liddell considered, shook his head. "I'll take a rain check on it. That is, unless you have something you want to tell me?"

She shook her head, pushed open the door, stepped out onto the apron. "So long, Liddell." She turned and headed up the flight of stairs to the entrance to the house.

Liddell watched the play of her hips against the tight skirt, sighed softly. He had the same feeling as the man who found a roll of hundred dollar bills only to learn they were counterfeit.

XI

THE DRESDEN HOTEL was a grimy old five-story building identified by an electric blinker. The Dresden had all the earmarks of a one night stand.

Johnny Liddell walked in, followed the threadbare and faded carpet to the registration desk. An old man with rheumy eyes, a purple and red road map of veins across his bulbous nose, a shock of untidy grey hair watched him approach with no signs of recognition.

Liddell dropped his voice as he stopped in front of the desk. "Any visitors?"

The old man pretended to get busy with the ledger in front of him. "Fuzz. In the corner. Staked out by a local dick."

Liddell half turned, looked over into the corner where a man was apparently engrossed in an open paper. He nodded to the man behind the desk, pushed his hand out at him. When he took his hand back, the folded bill in it had disappeared.

Liddell walked over to the man in the corner, stopped in front of him.

The man lowered the paper, grinned at him. "Hello, Liddell. You do get around." It was Harry Stanton, the young plainclothesman on Lieutenant Harrigan's staff.

"I could say the same for you. This is L.A. territory again. What's a Beverly Hills dick doing here?"

Stanton grinned at him. "Special permission. I'm just keeping

an eye on four eighty-two and her visitors."

Liddell grunted. "I suppose you guys have been tailing me all day?"

Stanton considered. "Not exactly. We did hear you had stashed the girl away here and since we also want to have a talk with Mac Gold, the loot figured we ought to keep an eye on her."

"What makes you think he'll try to get in touch?"

The detective pursed his lips, hesitated. "I guess we're supposed to co-operate so I don't think Harrigan would mind my telling you. Gold has been touch with the girl. By phone."

"You expect him to walk in so you can collar him?"

"It could happen." Stanton folded up his paper, dropped it on the chair next to him. "Seems you managed to steam up a couple of friends of his. Even gave them the hotel and room number?"

Liddell bobbed his head.

The plainclothesman grinned. "So apparently you had the same idea. You set the girl up, pass along the word of where she can be found and then sit and wait for him to walk in." The grin broadened. "Occurred to us, too."

"Then how come you didn't have her covered at the Figueroa house?"

"What makes you think we didn't? How'd you think we knew where you stashed her away? The man staking out the place just followed you here. He held it down until I could get here."

Liddell rubbed the heel of his hand along the side of his chin. "Looks like I underestimated your Lieutenant Harrigan."

"Most people do," Stanton conceded.

"Any objection to my having a talk with the girl?"

Stanton shrugged elaborately. "Of course not. She's not a prisoner or anything. Be my guest." He grinned broadly at Liddell. "I'll even lay chickee for you."

Liddell scowled at him, turned and headed across the faded rug to the elevators in the rear. He stepped into the cage, told the operator to take him to the fourth floor.

The rickety old cage groaned and creaked its way upward. Liddell watched the floor numbers crawl past the open grillwork of the door. Finally it shuddered to a stop, the door slammed open. He followed the well worn runner to the door marked 482, knocked.

Inside, he could hear the blurred sound of movement, but there was no response to his knock. He rapped again, waited. Still no answer. He put his face close to the door.

"Myrna?" He waited for a moment. "Myrna, this is Liddell."

There was a brief pause, then the sound of a key being turned in the lock. The door opened a frac-

tion of an inch. Then the door closed, he could hear the sound of a chain being removed. The door swung open again.

There was a strained look on the face of the girl in the doorway. "Liddell, please don't—"

He stepped into the room, kicked the door shut behind him. He got the impression of movement behind him, tried to spin away from it. A beefy fist came from nowhere, hit him on the side of the jaw, knocked him halfway across the room. He could hear bells ringing as he shook his head in an effort to clear it.

The man standing over him looked like a giant. Liddell's hand streaked for the shoulder holster, the gun had just cleared leather when the big man kicked out with his foot, caught Liddell in the wrist with the heavy toe of his shoe. The gun went skidding across the room, came to a stop in the far corner.

Johnny struggled to get to his feet, the big man laced the fingers of both hands, brought them down on the back of Liddell's neck with a chopping motion. It slammed him face down against the floor.

He lay still . . .

It seemed hours before consciousness came knocking at the top of Liddell's skull to the accompaniment of bright, searing flashes of light. The first thing that met his eyes when he finally got them open was a pair of size eleven shoes that practically wore a badge. He rolled his eyes upward. Towering over him with no sign of sympathy was Harry Stanton of the Beverly Hills police. Liddell groaned hollowly, closed his eyes as the room started to swirl again.

The next time he opened his eyes, the view was more encouraging. Myrna Farrell was staring down at him with worried eyes. She bent over, laid a wet cloth across his forehead. He found both the wet cloth and the bending very soothing. The fact that he could enjoy the effect of the deep neckline sagging as well as the cool feel of the cloth reassured him.

"You sure scared me," Myrna said. "I thought he killed you." She slid her arm under his back, helped him to a sitting position.

Liddell grunted as his eyes stopped on Stanton sitting in a chair, watching them. He looked back to the worried face of the girl. "Mac Gold, no doubt?"

She caught her lip between her teeth, bobbed her head. "He says he didn't have anything to do with the Messner killing. I told him to give himself up and he said he wouldn't, that the cops were looking for a fall guy so they wouldn't have to arrest some big shot. Then you came to the door."

"Perfect timing," Liddell groaned.

"He thought I had helped to trap him. He made me open the

door and he told me if I tried to warn you he'd kill me. And then he went out the window."

Stanton pulled himself out of his chair, brushed the wrinkles out of his trousers. "She called down for help. I got up here as quickly as I could." He shrugged. "The guy was already gone."

"So now what?" Liddell growled at Stanton.

"I checked in with the Skipper. He says he'd like to see you if you feel up to it. The lab has come up with a couple of things on the Messner case you might like to know. He said to tell you like he said this morning, he wants to cooperate all the way."

"Sure, sure." Johnny touched his fingers gently to the back of his neck. "Tell him the next broken neck is on him. With my compliments."

Stanton grinned. "From the way you looked when I walked in, it might be just as well if you didn't see him at all. I've heard about dicks using their heads on a case, but you do it the hard way."

"Very funny," Liddell said. He glanced over at the window. "I don't suppose it ever occurred to you super-sleuths that being a stunt man he might figure some other way in, instead of walking right into your hot little hands in the lobby?"

Stanton shook his head. "Matter of fact, it didn't. Did it occur to you?"

Liddell glared at him, murmured something impolite under his breath, stalked to the door.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Liddell," Myrna called after him.

He stopped with his hand on the door knob, scowled back at her. "Sorry for what? That he didn't break my neck?" He yanked open the door, walked out into the hall.

Stanton grinned at the girl, followed him out.

XII

LIEUTENANT HARRIGAN sat at his desk, his chair turned around so that he could rest his feet on the window sill, watch the gracefully swaying palm trees just outside his window. His jaws chomped peacefully on the ever present wad of gum, his hands were laced comfortably at the nape of his neck.

"You haven't told me what you wanted to see me about, Harrigan," Liddell said, a little impatiently.

"Oh, yeah." The man behind the desk squirmed into a more comfortable position. "Just thought we'd bring you up to date on what we've found out since this morning." He rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, touched the tips of his fingers in front of him, seemed to be collecting his thoughts. "First place, the bullet did come from the gun we found on the premis-

es." He rolled his eyes down to Liddell.

"However, the only fingerprints we've been able to lift off it belonged to Messner. Good ones on the barrel and the butt, some smudged ones on the trigger and guard that aren't a helluva lot of good. All his."

"If you're about to tell me that you're getting ready to write this one off as a suicide—"

The lieutenant looked hurt. "That's the farthest thing from our mind. Autopsy showed that it couldn't have been self-inflicted —no tattoo, and the angle was wrong." He shook his head, managed to look even more hurt. "I don't think you like us, Liddell. Why?"

"I don't think you're levelling with me for one thing. This morning you let me go out of here thinking that gun was lifted from the Magna Prop room and used on Messner. You knew damn well that Dirk had brought the gun home himself."

Harrigan pursed his lips, considered the complaint. "I'm not so sure we did. I'm still not sure." He waved off an interruption by Liddell. "I know what you're going to say. You're going to say that when the prop man and the director went looking for that gun, it was gone. So the presumption is that Messner took it with him."

He shook his head sadly. "You don't know our district attorney. He doesn't like presumptions. He wants facts. Unless we can come up with someone who saw the gun in Messner's possession after he left the studio—" He broke off, shook his head again. "So why should I mislead you this morning?"

Liddell growled deep in his chest, passed it up.

The lieutenant nodded his satisfaction. "We've also completed an examination of the place. There is no sign of a forced entry." The look of satisfaction faded slightly. "However, in view of the fact that our friend Mac Gold can and does make such unorthodox entrances as he did at the hotel—" He broke off thoughtfully. "I'd still like to have a talk with that guy."

"So would I," Liddell said grimly.

There was a knock on the door, it opened and a uniformed patrolman walked in carrying two paper containers of coffee. He set them on the corner of the desk.

"Meet any of the other members of our little cast?" Harrigan leaned forward, snagged one of the containers.

"Cruze," Liddell grunted. "His wife was playing house with Messner and the whole town was laughing at Cruze behind his back." He picked the other container off the desk, warmed the palms of his hands around it. "He admits he knew what was going on, but he

claims he didn't do anything about it because he was sure his wife would be coming back to him, 'sooner or later.' "

"There was a way to make sure it happened sooner rather than later." Harrigan gouged the top off his container, tossed it at the waste basket. "We had a talk with Cruze and his wife this morning." He looked up. "They both say they spent the evening together." He paused, pursed his lips. "They were both lying."

Liddell raised his eyebrows. "How do you know that?"

"Rita Cruze's car was seen in Messner's driveway last night by one of our boys in a prowl car." He leaned back. "Town like this, our boys make it a point to know people by their cars. A strange car parked around here gets special attention." He sighed. "Rita Cruze was a pretty regular visitor at Messner's, so the boys didn't give it a second thought."

"How late was it there?"

"That's the hell of it. We don't know."

Liddell grunted. "Why don't you bring the Cruzes in and ask them?"

Harrigan looked thoughtful. "There's no hurry. We're still checking out a few other things."

"Seems to me, you handle an awful lot of people with kid gloves in this town. First Harten has some mysterious alibi—"

"His alibi dropped in for a little talk on her way to a lunch date at the Gourmet. Backs up everything he says, from around nine until after two."

"And her husband?"

Harrigan stared down at his swirling coffee. "Making a p.a. in San Francisco with a new picture. We had to guarantee her we wouldn't use the statement unless we found holes in it before she'd sign it."

"You satisfied with it?"

"Until I find some reason to doubt it. Up to now I haven't."

"Seems to me you're sitting on two pretty good suspects. What are you waiting for?" Liddell ripped the top off his container, took a swallow of coffee, burned his tongue, swore under his breath.

"Proof."

"Cruze and his wife lied to you. You don't even call them on it. If they haven't got something to hide, why should they lie?"

Harrigan shrugged. "Any number of reasons. Best one is that they don't want to get dragged into a messy killing. Getting involved has cost a lot of people out here their career."

"You know what I think, lieutenant?"

Harrigan sighed. "I could probably make a pretty good guess."

"I think this Magna outfit tosses around a lot of weight. I think you're holding off because you're hoping it's some nothing like Mac

Gold you'll have to go up against instead of a Carroll Harten or even a Mike Cruze."

"Mac Gold is still a prime suspect," the lieutenant conceded. "We still want to talk to him very badly."

"Sure. And what if you can't tag him for the kill? This going to be another one of those Hollywood murders that everybody whispers about but nobody comes right out and names the killer?"

"I'm not throwing innocent people to the wolves, Liddell."

"Nobody's interested in throwing anybody to the wolves," Liddell said. "I came out here to save a man's life and I got here too late, so I'm not walking away from that smelling of roses. If my finding the killer means ripping those files of yours open and spilling the dirt this town has been sitting on for years, that's just what I'm going to do."

"Get out!"

Liddell got to his feet, dropped the full container of coffee into the waste basket. "It'll be a pleasure." He leaned on the corner, stared at the lieutenant. "In one way you're a lot smarter than I am. You took the trouble to check up on me. I should have gone to the same trouble." He straightened up, walked to the door and out through the outer office.

Lieutenant Harrigan sat staring at the closed door with a thoughtful expression. He reached over, pressed the button on the base of the telephone, leaned back.

The door to the detective bullpen opened, Harry Stanton walked in. He took the chair Johnny Liddell had just vacated. "Well?" he asked.

"Who's on Liddell now?" Harrigan asked.

"Eddie Carey. He'll pick him up outside the building, stick with him like a plaster. Moe Stein will be working with him. Liddell won't make those two."

Harrigan nodded. "Good. Make sure we don't lose him. And you stay out of sight. He knows your looks too good. And he don't like them."

Harrigan bobbed his head slowly. "I sure would like to lay my hands on that stunt man. It could solve an awful lot of our problems right now."

XIII

JOHNNY LIDDELL parked his convertible outside the white colonial building that housed the executive offices of Magna Films in Production City. He fed the parking meter a dime, headed into the building.

The first floor reception desk was presided over by a statuesque ash blonde with heavy, full lips and expertly tinted eyelids. She watched Liddell with studied disinterest as he waded across the acreage of carpet to her desk. He

told her who he was and that he wanted to see Carroll Harten.

She was able to restrain her enthusiasm as she picked up the telephone on the corner of the desk, jabbed at the button on its base, taking care not to fracture the enamel on her fingernail. She murmured into the mouthpiece, set the instrument back on its cradle.

"You may go right on up, Mr. Liddell," she said. "Mr. Harten's office is up the stairs, first door on your right."

Liddell dropped his cigarette into the ashtray, headed up the stairs.

Mike Cruze was sitting in the leather armchair at the corner of Carroll Harten's office when Liddell walked in. He nodded to Johnny, sat sucking on the stem of his pope.

"I haven't too much time right now, Liddell," Harten told him. At the moment we're pretty busy lining up scripts for a new series."

He waved to an empty chair. "Mike tells me you're an investigator working on the Dirk Messner killing." He watched Liddell walk to the chair, made no effort to shake hands. "I thought that's what we had a police department for."

"Let's put it this way," Liddell said, dropping into the chair. "The police department in this town seems to be more interested in protecting some of its citizens than it is in finding out who killed Dirk Messner."

"What's that got to do with me?" Harten snapped.

"You're one of those favored citizens," Liddell said.

Harten's mouth lengthened into a long, hard line; little bunches of muscle formed knots along the side of his jaw, his eyes went hard. "I've already talked to the police. They're satisfied I know nothing of importance about Dirk Messner's murder."

"Mighty convenient to have an alibi who's so important she can't be embarrassed by answering questions."

"What's the point you're trying to make, Liddell? That I killed Dirk Messner? I can't claim the honor, but whoever did kill him rates a medal in my book."

"And you rate a million dollars."

Harten leaned back, smiled icily. "So that's it. The insurance company has hired you to try to save them their pay-off. Well, you go back and tell your bosses—"

"I'm not working for any insurance company, and I couldn't care less whether they pay you or not."

"Then who are you working for?"

"The New York *Dispatch.*"

"That makes even more sense. That explains why you're so anxious to drag in names that will sell your rag." Harten leaned forward, placed the flat of his hands on the

desk. "That's not an original idea. Bigger men than you came into this town and tried to make a fortune smearing the people in it. Most of them were lucky to crawl away from it. You might not be that lucky."

"Don't threaten me, Harten. It's been tried by experts," Liddell said.

"I'm not threatening you, I am promising you. You connect me, or anybody in this company with this killing and you and the rag you work for are going to get slapped with the goddamdest libel action you ever saw."

"There's an old saying about libel, Harten. Never sue a newspaper for libel, they're liable to prove they're right."

Mike Cruze stirred restlessly in his chair. "Aren't you being a little ridiculous, Liddell? Coming to a man like Carroll Harten with insinuations like that? Does he look like a killer?"

Liddell turned his attention to Cruze for a moment. "What does a killer look like, Cruze? A college kid with a gun who's been told to kill for the glory of his country? A cornered rat? A desperate man with everything to gain and nothing to lose?"

Liddell turned back to Harten. "Like Harten. In a town where a man's only as good as his last picture, he has a real bomb on his hands. The only way he can walk away from it with clean hands is for something fatal to happen to Messner. And guess what! Something fatal happens to him. How lucky can you get?"

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Harten conceded.

Liddell turned back to Cruze. "Then, of course, a killer could look like a man who was put into such a contemptible position that the only way he could save his face—"

The director half rose from his seat. "If you're referring to me, forget it. I already told you the police know where I was last night."

Liddell grinned at him. "So you did. With your wife all evening, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"It sure must have gotten an interesting evening. Your wife was at Messner's house last night. And the police know it."

The color drained from Mike Cruze's face. "You're a liar."

"Am I?" Liddell indicated the phone. "Call Harrigan in Beverly Hills. Your wife's car's been parked in that driveway so often the police know it by sight. A prowl car reported it there around midnight."

The director dropped back into his chair. "They must have been mistaken."

"Tell them that," Liddell snapped.

"Don't say anything more until we talk to legal, Mike," Harten

told him. "This guy has no official standing. You don't have to tell him a thing."

Cruze dropped his eyes to his hands in his lap. "I've got nothing to hide. He's right. Rita was at Messner's house last night. So was I!"

"Let me get somebody from legal in here, Mike," Harten reached for the intercom button, was stopped by a gesture from the director.

"I don't need a lawyer, Carroll. I didn't kill Messner and neither did my wife." He looked up, met Liddell's gaze without flinching. "We did spend the early part of the evening together at home, like I said. Around eleven-thirty Rita got a call. It was from Messner. She went out right after that. When she wasn't home by one o'clock, I drove over to see if her car was parked outside his place. It was."

"Go on."

Cruze shrugged. "I waited around until about one-thirty. She came out. He was with her. They stood on the stairs arguing, then she walked down the stairs, got into her car. He was alive when we both drove off."

Liddell grunted. "Why didn't you tell that to the police?"

The director grinned humorlessly. "And have the whole mess spread over the front pages? The scandal would finish me out here. And this is the only way I know how to make a living." He shook his head. "I figured nobody had seen us, and Dirk wouldn't be talking—" He broke off, shook his head again.

"You're going to have to tell the police sooner or later. The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be to make them believe you," Liddell told him.

"They'll believe him," Harten snapped.

"That must be quite a due bill you have with the police," Liddell grunted.

"It'll do," the producer nodded. "Now, if you've got nothing else on your mind, you're taking up our valuable time."

Liddell got up from his chair. "Unless the police buy those alibis, one of you may have nothing but time." His eyes jumped from Cruze to the producer and back. "I'll be talking to you again. Maybe next time I'll have something more concrete to talk to you about." He took his time about leaving the office, slammed the door after him.

XIV

MICKEY CURREN'S Bon Chance was a squat three story building on the north side of the Strip. On the first floor, it featured a bar and a dining room that was half filled as Johnny Liddell and Muggsy entered. They walked into the bar, found two stools,

climbed up on them. A tall thin man in a white starched jacket walked down the bar to where they sat, favored them with a fixed smile that exposed a set of too perfect teeth.

"Two scotch on the rocks," Liddell said.

The bartender went through the motions of selecting a scotch from the back bar, dumped some ice cubes into a glass, washed them down with scotch. He slid them across the bar, reached down for a small silver pitcher of water.

"My friend is from out of town," Muggsy smiled at the bartender. "I'm showing him the sights." She opened her bag, brought out her Writers' Guild card. "I've been telling him about your place and he couldn't wait to see it."

"We're glad you could drop by," the bartender told her. His eyes memorized the name on the card, he turned and headed back down the bar.

Liddell softened the scotch in each of the glasses with water, pushed Muggsy's drink in front of her. "What was that about?" he grunted.

"You'll see." Muggsy took a sip of her drink, waited until she saw the bartender at the far end of the bar picked up a small telephone, speak into it. She nudged Liddell. "We're being processed."

The room beyond was filled with formally dressed men and decollete women huddling around the three craps tables and the two roulette wheels with which it was furnished. Along the wall, a row of one-armed bandits stood with one metal arm raised in salute. Some of the machines were getting a play, but most of the action was at the crap tables.

Johnny was just about to order a couple of drinks when a man in a blue tuxedo walked up to him.

"I understand your name is Liddell? Would that be Johnny Liddell? From New York?"

Liddell nodded. "That's right," he said.

An annoyed frown cut a ditch between the man's eyebrows. He favored Muggsy with a jaundiced look. "I'm afraid I didn't know who you were, Liddell. Mr. Curren does. He'd like to see you in his office." The way Blue Tuxedo said it, it was just like getting a bid from St. Peter. "If you'll just come this way, please?"

When Muggsy started to follow Liddell, Williams turned on her with a fixed smile. "Mr. Curren wanted to talk to Liddell alone, Miss Kiely." He indicated the room beyond. "Why don't you amuse yourself as our guest while you're waiting?"

Muggsy nodded. "All right—I will. Go ahead, Johnny. Do as the man says."

Curren's office was at the far

end of the game room, was identified merely by a gilt stencilling of "Private". The man in the tuxedo rapped, waited until a muted voice invited them in.

The office was comfortably furnished with large easy chairs, a few tables scattered around. The illumination was provided by lamps, giving the room a warm, intimate glow.

Mickey Curren was sprawled in an easy chair, his feet propped up on a low table. He watched Liddell enter with no show of enthusiasm. From somewhere, a hi-fi was spilling muted dance music into the room.

It had been years since Johnny Liddell last saw the gambler. As he sat there now, everything about him suggested icy calm—sparkling blue eyes, white hair that contrasted with the jet black of his brows, thin lips that seemed wreathed in a perpetual smile and almost too perfectly capped teeth.

He nodded to Blue Tuxedo. "You can wait outside, Al." After the bodyguard had closed the door behind him, the cold blue eyes came back to Liddell. "Off your beat, aren't you, Liddell? I'd figure I'd be more likely to run into you on Forty-eighth Street than out here."

He reached for a cigar in the humidor at his elbow, bit off the end, spat it at a waste basket. "What brings you around?"

"I've been hearing how good you're doing. You don't think I'd go back East without looking your place over? The boys would never forgive me."

"Okay, so you've seen it." He chewed the end of the cigar, watched Liddell's face. "What's to keep you?"

"I kind of like your climate out here, Mick. Plenty of sunshine, plenty of broads. Seems like a man could get used to living like this real easy."

"You're wrong, Liddell. I don't think this climate would agree with you at all."

Liddell walked over to the humidor, picked up a cigar, held it to his nose, dropped it back in the humidor. "You seem to be thriving."

Curren rolled the unlit cigar in the center of his lips between thumb and forefinger. "That's because we're two different kinds of guy, Liddell. Me, I keep my nose out of things that don't concern me. Like that a man could thrive in this climate. You never learned how to do that."

Liddell grinned. "Sounds dull."

The man in the chair lifted one foot, studied the gloss on his shoe. "Oh, I know. You're tough. Real tough." He rolled his eyes over to Liddell. "Only out here, you don't get to throw your weight around like you do in New York. Out here, a few of us gets to say what goes on."

"Like whether or not a guy like

Dirk Messner lives to break ninety?"

Curren dropped his foot back on the table. He chewed on his cigar, stared at Liddell owlishly. "I swore off the muscle a long time ago, Liddell. But for you I might make an exception." Without taking his eyes off Liddell, he bawled out, "Al!"

The door opened, the football-type walked in. He closed the door behind him, looked from Liddell to the man in the chair and back.

"Man thinks I had something to do with what happened to Dirk Messner last night," Curren told him in a flat voice. "Rumors like that getting around could cause trouble." He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, examined the soggy end critically. "Think maybe we could persuade him to mind his own business?"

Liddell grinned bleakly. "For a minute you had me fooled, Mick. But what they say about a leopard and his spots—that goes for a rat, too."

Curren bounced the cigar off the floor. "Take him good. I owe him plenty from the old days."

The man in the blue tuxedo casually slipped out of his jacket. He sank into a crouch, hands high, chin tucked behind his shoulder. Liddell recognized the crouch at once as signalling an ex-pro. And from the lack of marks on his face, probably a good one. He kept watching the man shuffling toward him, waiting for an opening.

Al Williams moved with surprising speed, shot a hand right at Liddell's head. Johnny swayed out of its path, brought his left up into the footballer's midsection. Williams didn't seem to feel the punch, kept wading in. He caught Liddell on the side of the head with a ham-like fist that started the lights flashing and the bells ringing in Johnny's head. The big paw landed again and Liddell felt the floor slope upward and hit him in the face.

"Stamp him!" Curren roared.

Williams walked over to where Liddell lay. "Nothing personal, mister!" He raised his foot up, aimed the heavy heel at Liddell's head and kicked. Johnny rolled over, caught the foot and twisted. Williams hit the floor with a thump that rattled the humidor on the end table.

Liddell struggled to his feet, watched the snarling, contorted face of the other man as he slowly pulled himself up. He waited grimly for Williams to resume the assault. The boyish good looks of the football-type were twisted into a murderous scowl.

Williams' hand dipped into his pocket, reappeared with a knife. A murderous blade sprang into view with a click, he held it, point up in the approved style of a knife fighter, shuffled toward Liddell.

"You just pushed your luck too far, mister."

On the chair, Curren watched his man warily circling Liddell with the knife in his hand. "Cut him real good."

The man with the knife circled warily for a moment, then made a sudden lunge. Liddell sidestepped, caught his wrist as the knife whizzed past. He twisted with all his strength.

Williams screamed with pain, his feet left the floor, he landed in a heap at Liddell's feet, his knife skidding across the floor. Johnny reached down, sank his fingers in the man's hair, pulled him to his

feet. He sank his left to the cuff in the man's midsection, chopped viciously at the side of the man's ear. Williams hit the floor face first, didn't move.

Mickey Curren sat glued to his chair. His jaw sagged, he stared at Liddell.

Johnny walked over to where the knife lay. He picked it up, tested the point on the ball of his thumb.

Curren flattened back against the cushion of the chair as Liddell walked up to him.

"Don't do anything crazy, Liddell," He fought a losing battle to keep his eyes off the knife blade. "A dozen people saw you come in here. You'd never get away with it."

"Who killed Dirk Messner, Curren?"

"I don't know," the man in the chair shook his head. "How would I know?"

Liddell reached down, caught him by the lapel of his jacket, pulled him to his feet. He touched the tip of the blade to Curren's neck. "Who killed him?"

"I had nothing to do with it. Why should I want him dead?"

"Word is that he owed you some money and got behind with his payments."

Curren arched his head higher in a futile effort to get his neck clear of the sharp point of the switchblade. "All the more reason. With him dead, I don't get my money. Out here, you don't have to use muscle. People listen to reason."

Liddell jabbed the point of the blade into the soft skin of the other man's neck. He yelped in fright, touched his finger to the nick, drew away a drop of blood.

"All right, you say you didn't kill him. Who did?"

"I don't know. I swear I don't know." He winced as Liddell brought the knife close again. "But I got an idea."

"Go on."

Curren licked at his lips. "Harten, Messner's producer. He's into me real good. I've been planning to have a talk with him. Only tonight he calls me. He tells me he'll pay me dollar for dollar as soon as the insurance money comes in on that series he was doing. Dollar for dollar."

Liddell lowered the knife. He frowned at Curren, the white-haired man backed away from him, swabbing at his neck, examining the bloodstain on his finger.

"You wouldn't be lying to me?" Liddell growled.

"Why should I?"

"I don't know. Only it doesn't make sense. Harten doesn't get any of that money. It goes to the company."

"I'm just telling you what he told me. But you didn't get it from me, Liddell. I'm no stool pigeon."

Liddell grinned at him. "You sure could fool me." He stepped

over the unconscious bodyguard, walked out into the gaming room beyond.

Muggsy was still at the craps table, the small pile of chips the slot man had given her was now three stacks. She smiled happily as Liddell walked up.

"This sure is a hospitable place." She peered at him closely. "Looks like you did all right from all the lipstick smeared on you."

Liddell grinned crookedly. "Lipstick, hell. That's Mickey Curren's blood."

XV

THE MAILBOX at the entrance to the winding driveway had the name "Harten" on it in reflector letters. Johnny Liddell's headlights picked it up, held it for a moment before he swung off the highway onto the driveway. It wound through a lane of trees to the house itself, a sprawling redwood and fieldstone ranch type house.

Standing in the driveway under the garage floodlight was a cluster of cars.

"Looks like he's having a party," Muggsy pointed out. "Are we going to crash?"

Liddell peered through the windshield, growled deep in his chest. "One of those cars is a patrol car." He turned, scowled at Muggsy. "The other looks like—"

From somewhere behind them came the thin wail of a siren. It reached for a high note, died away. As Liddell pulled up alongside the other cars, he could see the red beam of the ambulance headlights swing off the road onto the driveway.

They stayed in their car, watched the police ambulance feel its way up the driveway, swing to a stop near the path leading from the garage to the front door. Two men in white hopped out of the ambulance. From the back they took a wheeled stretcher, headed for the house.

"Looks like someone got the same idea I did. Only quicker," Liddell growled. He pushed open the door, stepped out onto the driveway. Muggsy joined him.

"Do you think it's Harten?" she asked.

"Figures to be," Liddell said. He took her by the elbow, steered her in the wake of the medical examiner's men. Suddenly, he stopped. "Incidentally, whose jurisdiction is this in? Harrigan's or the sheriff's?"

"This is part of Beverly Hills," Muggsy said. "Harrigan's jurisdiction."

Liddell groaned softly, walked up and knocked on the door. A uniformed officer opened it in response to the knock.

"Lieutenant Harrigan here?" Liddell asked.

"He expecting you?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "I

think he'd be disappointed if I didn't show up."

The officer nodded, stepped aside, pointed to a closed door. "In there."

Liddell walked to the door of the den, pushed it open. It was a large room with a sliding glass wall facing onto the terrace beyond. It was furnished as half den, half office, with a large desk in one corner, a colorful Indian rug covering the floor. On the wall, framed and autographed pictures of stars with whom Harten had worked over the years testified to their undying friendship.

Harrigan stood conferring with the two men from the medical examiner's office. He looked up and scowled as he recognized Liddell. He finished his conversation with the men in white, walked over to where Liddell and the redhead stood waiting.

"You're improving. You're finding them while they're still warm," he grunted.

Liddell's eyes roved past the lieutenant to the suggestively shaped bulge under the blanket halfway across the room.

"Harten?" he asked.

The lieutenant bobbed his head. "Take a look, if you like."

Liddell walked over, caught the end of the blanket, lifted it. Carroll Harten lay sprawled on his face, his arms extended, fingers clenched. A dark red stain on the back of his white evening jacket was already beginning to darken.

Liddell dropped the blanket back into place, straightened up. "Find the weapon?"

Harrigan nodded, led the way to the desk. With a pencil, he lifted a long pair of clipping scissors. The blades were stained with slowly congealing blood.

"Right through the back. Caught him in the lower lobe of the heart from the looks of it." He dropped the scissors back on the desk. "Apparently Harten's own scissors." He pointed the pencil at the telephone. "The phone was on the floor next to his hand. We've had some prints lifted off it, spot checked against his. He was holding the phone all right when he got it."

"How'd you get the flash?"

"Pure luck," Harrigan grunted. "He was talking on the telephone with Joyce Messner. She says he told her he thought he could tell her who killed her husband. She heard him gasp, there was a blubbery noise, then the sound of the phone hitting the floor." He shrugged. "She tried to call him back. When she couldn't get him, she called us, told us what happened. By the time we got here he was dead."

"Any prints on the scissors?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "Nothing that looks any good. A few blurs and a smear. Nothing clean.

Liddell looked around the

room, saw two glasses on an end table. He walked over, noticed that there were half melted ice cubes and a trace of liquor in one, the other was almost full. He put his fingers in the top of the almost full glass, spread them so he could lift the glass without defacing any possible prints on the outside. He breathed on the glass, looked for prints. There were none.

He repeated the process with the other glass. A full set of prints appeared when he breathed on the glass.

"Probably Harten's," Liddell grunted to no one in particular. He squinted at the other glass. Either the killer was drinking with Harten, or he had made a drink expecting someone to drink with him.

He jumped involuntarily as the telephone on the desk jangled noisily. A plainclothesman walked over, picked it up with his handkerchief, muttered into it. When he replaced the receiver on its hook, he walked over to Harrigan, whispered to him. The lieutenant bobbed his head with satisfaction.

"One of our boys picked up your friend Mac Gold going in the back entrance to Morton's Gym," he told Liddell. "Looks like things are beginning to come to a head."

Liddell grinned glumly. "Still hoping to pin it on Gold, lieutenant? How do you think this will tie in with the Messner kill?"

"You're the detective who uses his head," Harrigan told him. "Suppose you tell me."

"You know something? I might just be able to do that," Liddell said. "When are you planning to question Gold? Tonight?"

Harrigan consulted his watch. "He'll keep until morning."

"Do me a favor, lieutenant?"

"Give me one good reason why I should."

Liddell grinned at him. "I might be able to turn the killer over to you with all the proof you'll need for a fast conviction."

Harrigan considered for a moment. "What's the favor?"

"Hold off the questioning until around eleven in the morning."

"Why? You a late sleeper?"

Liddell shook his head. "I have a pretty good idea who the killer is. There are just a few loose ends I want to tie up, then he's all yours." He saw the indecision on the lieutenant's face. "Otherwise, I'll explode my theory in the *Dispatch* and you can read it when the wire services pick it up for the west coast."

Harrigan scowled at him. "I'd never agree to it ordinarily, Liddell. But since it will mean only a short delay—I'll take a chance on it. But that doesn't mean I've forgotten what you said in my office, understand?"

Liddell nodded and walked over to Muggsy. "Let's get on home. I've got an early day tomorrow." He stopped as an after-

thought. "By the way, lieutenant, could you arrange to have Mickey Curren, Mike Cruze and his wife and Joyce Messner there? They all know a little, but when you put everything they know together, you get the whole picture."

Harrigan shook his head. "I couldn't take the chance, Liddell. If the press ever got wind of it and you couldn't deliver, I might just as well put my hat on, start walking and keep right on walking until the hat started to float in the Pacific."

"Let's make it unofficial. How about meeting out at the studio? In Mike Cruze's office. The newspaper people won't see anything funny about Cruze or Mac Gold or Joyce Messner showing up there."

"You want all of them?" Harrigan grunted.

"Plus Mickey Curren."

Harrigan shook his head. "No soap. Curren would raise all kinds of hell if I tried to bring him in."

Liddell sighed. "Look. You're forever telling me you have no standing anyplace but Beverly Hills. Okay, so the studio is in North Hollywood. Curren's got to figure it's not a trap. I think I might be able to persuade him to show up."

Harrigan thought that over for a moment, capitulated ungraciously. He bobbed his head. "Okay. But you'd better not leave me holding the stick on this thing."

"You just made yourself a good deal, lieutenant," Liddell said. He walked to the desk, looked over at Muggsy. "What's the number of the Bon Chance?"

"Sunset Two-three thousand," she said.

Liddell dialled the number, waited. "I want to talk to Mickey Curren." There was an argument from the other end. "He doesn't? Well, tell him he'll take this one. This is Johnny Liddell. Tell Curren that whether or not the papers get the story of what went on in his office tonight depends on how fast he gets his fanny to that phone."

There was a click, Liddell grinned at the puzzled look on Muggsy's face.

"What did go on there?" she wanted to know.

Liddell winked at her, the metallic voice of the operator came through.

"He'll talk to you." She sounded properly impressed. There was a click, then the surly voice of the gambler came through.

"Listen good, Mick," Liddell said. "Carroll Harten was killed tonight. I know who did it and you can help me prove it." He waited, listened patiently to the torrent of noise from the other end. "I'm not trying to pull you into anything. I just want you to meet me at Magna Studios tomorrow morning at 11. In Mike Cruze's private office—"

The torrent of words cut him off again, Liddell took the receiver away from his ear, waited. "Knock it off," he said finally. "You know the boys listen to me, they know I don't snow them. You also know they hate stool pigeons." There was silence from the other end. "Well? Do we make the meet?" He waited for a moment, then bobbed his head in satisfaction. "Eleven in Mike Cruze's office in Magna Studios." He grinned. "Sure. Bring a dozen if it'll make you feel better."

Liddell dropped the receiver on the hook. "He'll be there."

Harrigan stared at him. "You're very persuasive."

"You'd be surprised just how persuasive." Liddell turned to Muggsy. "Ready?"

She shook her head in exasperation. "But we just got here. How could you—"

"I've seen all I had to see and heard all I had to hear. I know who killed Dirk Messner and the same one killed Harten because he stumbled on the truth, too." He saw the unasked question in the girl's eyes, shook his head. "Sorry, Muggs, you're going to have to wait with the rest until I get the proof."

She started to argue, shrugged. "You're probably wrong, anyway."

Liddell managed to look unhappy. "If I am, I'd better be on the next jet to Japan." He brightened up. "But I can't be. Once you know where to look, the trial is too plain."

And she had to be satisfied with that.

XVI

THE GATEMAN AT Magna Studio tried on his audition smile as Johnny Liddell drove up the next morning, turned it off when he recognized him.

"Mike Cruze is expecting me. Name's Liddell," Johnny told him.

The gateman found the name on his list, nodded Liddell through. "Right up this main street, turn right where the arrow says Production Center. He has office one-ten on the main floor of the big white building."

Liddell nodded his thanks, drove into the studio.

The doorman stood at the gate, watched the convertible head up the street, shook his head. "Cruze must be having a party. That's the fourth one I okayed through for him," he told his partner in the gatehouse.

"They always have a party when they wrap up a series."

The gateman scowled at him. "They didn't wrap up Jerry Blake. They buried Dirk Messner."

"Any better reason for a party?" his partner grunted.

Johnny Liddell swung right at the sign marked *Production Centre,* pulled into a parking lot out-

side the white building. He walked to the heavy glass doors leading into an air conditioned lobby.

A girl at the reception desk smiled pertly. "May I help you?"

"Mike Cruze is expecting me."

She picked up a typewritten list. "Your name, please?"

"Johnny Liddell."

She nodded, crossed his name off the list. He noticed that his was the last name to be crossed off. "I think you'll find they're waiting for you, Mr. Liddell. Room one-ten." She pointed down the corridor with her pencil.

Johnny Liddell walked down the hallway, opened the door to Mike Cruze's office without knocking. Cruze, sitting behind the desk, scowled at him. His pipe was in its usual position, clenched between his teeth. The air conditioner on his window was sucking the blue white smoke toward it as he exhaled.

On the over-sized leather couch that dominated one panelled wall, Muggsy Kiely sat talking to an auburn-haired woman he had not seen before. Mickey Curren sat glowering at him from a large leather armchair. Lieutenant Harrigan sat on the corner of the desk, swinging his right leg negligently. He showed no sign of enthusiasm as Liddell closed the door behind him.

"You know everybody here, Liddell?" Harrigan wanted to know.

"I don't think I've met the lady." He indicated the woman on the couch with Muggsy.

The lieutenant scowled at him. "What are you pulling? You said each one of these had to be here because they all knew something that would help you put the thing together?"

"I presume by that she'd be Rita Cruze?"

The woman nodded her head. "That's right."

"I'm Johnny Liddell."

She managed to seem unimpressed. "So I gathered." She glanced at her watch. "I was told this wouldn't take very much time. If we can dispense with the formalities and ask me any questions you have in mind, I have other plans for the morning."

"I imagine Carroll Harten had some plans for today, too," Liddell said. He turned to a heavy-shouldered man with the dull glint of a beard along his jowls who sat glowering at him. "Mac Gold?"

The man gave no response, continued to stare at Liddell.

"This is Gold," Harrigan said. "Him, you've met. Although you may not remember it."

Liddell ran the tips of his fingers along the side of his jaw. "I remember."

The man in the chair clenched and unclenched thick fingers in his lap. "How much you getting paid to frame me so one of the big shots can walk away from it?" he asked.

"Maybe I'm doing it for free. I sure owe you something, buddy," Liddell said. He turned to the last person in the room, Joyce Messner, grinned at her. She smiled back. "Thanks for coming."

The snow top shrugged. "The lieutenant told me you were going to tell us who killed Dirk."

"And Harten," Liddell added.

"And Harten. They couldn't keep me away."

Harrigan swung his leg, the heel of his shoe hitting his desk. "You told us you were sure the same one killed both of them. In that case, Mac Gold is clear. He has an alibi for last night."

"This case is lousy with alibis," Liddell grunted. "Anyway, I know Gold didn't kill Messner."

The stunt man half rose in his seat, dropped back. "Then why did you have them drag me over here?"

"Who knows from dragging?" Liddell shrugged. "I just suggested you be here. I wanted to see you without having that fist of yours in my face. Besides, it wasn't until this morning I could be sure." He turned back to Harrigan. "The guy at the gym made sense when he said Gold might have killed Messner, but if he did it wouldn't have been with a gun."

Liddell pointed to the stunt man whose narrowed eyes, under a line of scar tissue, shone with inner anger. "A guy like Mac Gold kills when he's crazy mad. But only with his hands."

Gold's eyes dropped down to his hands. He clenched his right fist, broken knuckles rose crazily askew. He studied the hand as if he'd never seen it before.

"Then why did you wait until this morning to decide that?"

Liddell shrugged. "I was sure, but not positive. After all, the guy wouldn't come in. I told his girl I wanted to talk to him." He looked over at the stunt man. "If he'd come in like I said, I could have cleared him right out."

"I figured you were setting me up." Gold had his heavy voice under control although his hands were still clenching and unclenching in his lap. "I had it figured one of the studio big shots grabbed the chance to kill the little rat and blame me. And I figured you were being hired to do the job of framing me."

"Who did you think killed him?" Liddell asked.

"Harten. Everybody knew he stood everything to gain and nothing to lose by Messner getting it. And there sure was no love lost."

"And now?"

The stunt man shrugged heavy shoulders. "As long as I'm in the clear I don't care who did it. There was one guy who really needed killing."

The woman on the couch stirred uncomfortably. "Really, lieuten-

ant, do you think it's necessary for us to—"

Liddell looked her over carefully for the first time. Joyce Messner had said Rita Cruze was no beauty, yet the blonde's husband had been coming on big for the woman. She was just the opposite of Joyce Messner, dark where the other woman was blonde. Her breasts didn't have the same tiptilted perfection, her thighs looked thickened, her legs were dancer's legs.

But there was a serenity in the wide spaced eyes, an indication of smoldering passion in the full lips. Her nose was retrousse, pert; her hair an auburn that didn't come out of a bottle. Liddell could imagine a man finding relief from the artificiality of a Joyce Messner in the company of a real woman like Rita Cruze.

"I know this may be a nuisance to you, Mrs. Cruze," he told her. "But I'm going to have to do this my way. Practically everybody in this room has been under suspicion for the murder of Dirk Messner. Last night, the murderer struck again, and this time left a signature. It makes a good many things a lot clearer."

Mike Cruze sucked noisily on his pipe. His eyes darted nervously to the lieutenant who sat on the edge of the desk, admiring the high shine of his shoes.

"Lieutenant, when you got us to agree to come here, you didn't tell us you were going to make an arrest."

"He's not making any arrest." Mickey Curren got to his feet. "He couldn't even square a parking ticket in this part of the town. And if he thinks he can stop me from walking out—"

Harrigan looked up, shook his head. "I have no intention of stopping anybody. I'm just like you—a guest. This is Liddell's party." He eyed Johnny. "And so far I wouldn't say you're doing too good."

"I'm a slow starter." Liddell walked over to where Curren stood. He put the flat of his hand against the gambler's chest, pushed him back into the chair. "You're not going anyplace."

"If you've got any crazy idea you could pin this on me, you're stupider than you look, shamus." Some of the ice calm was deserting the white-haired man. He smoothed back his hair with the flat of his hand. "You try building a frame with me sitting dead center and you'll fall flat on your face."

"I never said you killed either of them. In the first place, like you said, killing a mark you're into for paper is no way to get your money. But more important than that, Messner was so scared of you he never would have let you into the house. And he never would have put that gun down where you could pick it up and use it on him."

"Then what am I doing here?"

"I just wanted you to repeat for the rest of them what you told me last night."

The white-haired man stared up at Liddell, his upper lip peeled back from the too perfectly capped teeth. "I never told you a thing."

Liddell reached down, caught him by the lapels, pulled him to his feet. He tugged him to his tiptoes. "Tell them."

The blue eyes that stared into Liddell's were no longer icy. They had melted, turned watery. "What did I tell you?"

"About Harten."

Curren tried for a look of defiance, didn't make it. He dropped his eyes.

"Harten owed me money. Plenty."

Liddell shook him like a terrier with a rat. "Go on."

"I was leaning," he raised his eyes. "When I lose, I expect to pay, so when I win, I expect to get paid. He was welshing so I sent a couple of boys to talk to him." He paused for a moment, read the message in Liddell's eyes. "He called last night to say he'd pay me dollar for dollar as soon as the insurance company paid off on the Jerry Blake mess," he added hastily.

Liddell pushed him back into the chair.

Cruze pulled the pipe from between his teeth. "He's lying. He's got to be lying. Harten didn't have the production insured. Magna did. Harten wouldn't get a dime out of it."

Liddell brought an envelope from his pocket. "Jerry Blake Productions, Incorporated was the beneficiary." He looked over to Harrigan. "That's what took me so long this morning. I dropped by Seaway Indemnity to look over the papers."

Cruze scowled at him. "Jerry Blake Productions is just one of the companies Magna sets up for individual series. It's still Magna."

Liddell returned the envelope to his pocket. "By the way, Cruze, where were you last night?"

"I—That is, my wife and I were—"

The woman on the couch spoke up. "Don't lie again, Mike." She looked at Liddell. "He's trying to protect me. He was drinking pretty heavily in the early part of the evening. I couldn't take much more of it, so I pulled out the car and drove around."

She drew a handkerchief from her bag, touched the tip of her nose. She worked the handkerchief nervously in her lap. "I had a lot of thinking to do."

Liddell nodded for her to continue.

"It's no secret that Dirk and I were having an affair." She turned, stared defiantly at Joyce Messner. "He and his wife had never gotten along." She looked back at where Mike Cruze sat behind the desk,

his head bowed. "I'm afraid I had gotten too used to taking Mike for granted. And Dirk was a lot more exciting. I really thought he intended to divorce his wife and marry me."

"You don't think so now?"

The auburn-haired woman considered it. "I don't know. The last time I saw him was the night he was murdered. He called, said he wanted to see me."

"What time was that?"

"Between eleven and twelve."

Liddle nodded. "What did he want to talk to you about?" he asked.

The woman hesitated. "I had told him I couldn't go on any longer hurting Mike by hiding in back streets and meeting him behind Mike's back. That we would either have to get married or stop seeing each other."

Mike Cruze raised his head, stared at his wife.

"When he called the night he was killed he said he had thought it over and wanted to talk it out with me." Her nervous fingers tore the dainty wisp of handkerchief, she looked down at it. "When I saw him he told me he'd decided it wasn't the right time to divorce his wife and he wanted me to promise I wouldn't stop seeing him."

Mike Cruze's eyes were fixed on her, he seemed to be holding his breath.

"I told Dirk I'd never see him again," the woman finished. She looked up. "I told him I was going home to my husband—if he'd have me."

"Why didn't you tell me this?" Cruze asked her miserably.

She looked at him, shook her head. "I didn't want to hurt you any more. I didn't want to tell you —I wanted to prove it to you."

Cruze got up from his chair, circled his desk, walked to the couch, dropped down alongside her. He took her hand in his, looked at Liddell. "Maybe I lied to you at first. But I told you the truth the second time. Dirk Messner was alive when she left his house. And she wasn't out of my sight for the rest of that night."

"He's lying," Joyce Messner sniffed. "Why shouldn't he say that she wasn't out of his sight and that my husband was alive when she left? Doesn't that automatically give him an alibi?"

"Mike Cruze didn't kill your husband or Harten, Joyce," Liddell told her. "Neither did his wife."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

Liddell grinned glumly. "Because you killed him."

XVII

THERE WAS A startled pause. Slowly, one by one the people in the room looked from Liddell to Joyce Messner. Her eyes hop-

scotched from face to face, came to a halt on Liddell.

"You must be crazy. I can prove where I was all night. There were a dozen people at Mario's —" A triumphant expression washed the astonishment from her eyes. "You know that, lieutenant. Your men checked me out. I was in Mario's from ten that night until after he was dead."

She looked back at Liddell. "And you try to prove otherwise, mister."

"I wouldn't want to." He stared at her for a moment. "You told me that the reason you went out that night was because Dirk had told you Rita Cruze was coming over."

"That's right, he—" The trap became apparent to her too late. She clamped her teeth on her lower lip.

"Messner didn't know that Rita was coming over until almost midnight—two hours after you left. He told you about Rita Cruze when you got back. He intimated he might leave you for her, you grabbed the gun and killed him!"

"That's a lie." The color had drained from the blonde's face, leaving the deep tan a yellow color. "You heard yourself she wasn't going to leave her husband." Her eyes beseeched the others. "Why should I kill him because of another woman? It was a perfect arrangement for both of us."

"The Jerry Blake series was headed for the scrapheap. It was Dirk's big chance to get his hands on some money." He turned to Mike Cruze. "You told me Dirk had twenty-five percent of the package?"

Cruze bobbed his head.

Liddell looked over at Harrigan. "The package was Jerry Blake Produtcions, Incorporated. Magna owned seventy-five percent and Messner twenty-five percent." He brought the envelope from his pocket. "That means the beneficiary of the insurance on the production was split the same way—seventy-five percent for Magna, twenty-five percent for Dirk." He tossed the envelope on the desk.

"Joyce Messner stood to get a quarter of a million dollars for Dirk's death." He stared at her. "You hated him and only lived with him for the security and for his potential. You saw a chance to get all that without him and you grabbed it. It would be hard to come up with a stronger motive."

The blonde licked at her lips. "I suppose I killed Carroll Harten, too? I was nowhere near his house last night."

Harrigan eyed Liddell. "How about that?"

"Stop playing with me, Harrington," Liddell growled. "All the evidence points to the fact that a woman killed Harten."

The lieutenant bobbed his head. "You noticed that, too."

"What evidence?" Joyce Messner demanded.

"There were no fingerprints on the scissors, but they hadn't been wiped clean. Same thing for the glass of whoever was with him when he was killed. One glass had Harten's prints, the other none. That means the other person wore gloves," Harrigan explained.

Liddell nodded. "And since Haren knew the other person had killed Messner, he wouldn't have turned his back on a man wearing gloves on a hot night." He frowned at Harrigan. "He let the killer know he knew the whole story, cut himself in for a piece of Dirk's share of the insurance. That's when he called Curren."

He glanced at the gambler, huddled sulkily in his chair. "That's why he was able to promise to pay dollar for dollar when the insurance claim was settled."

"But I called you from home, lieutenant. I told you Carroll said the killer was with him, that I heard him fall. I heard him killed while he was talking to me. I called you right up to report it. Your men must have been here in minutes. That's something you can check on, lieutenant."

Harrigan pursed his lips, nodded. "It took about six minutes from the time your call was logged to the time the patrol car got here," he conceded. "Harten was on the floor with the scissors sticking out of the middle of his back, the phone was off the hook, on the floor alongside him."

Liddell eyed him narrowly. "Go on, tell her the rest."

Liddell snorted. "If Harten had called you, Mrs. Messner, and he was killed and dropped the phone to the floor, you couldn't have called the police!" He watched her face drop. "You couldn't make a call from your phone until the connection was broken. And you couldn't break it from your end."

Harrigan grunted, shook his head. "You know something, Liddell? I sure underestimated you."

He dug his hand into his pocket, brought out a folded paper. "I have here a warrant for the arrest of Mrs. Joyce Messner for the murders of Dirk Messner and Carroll Harten." He reached over the desk, picked up the phone. "Send those two men in." He dropped the receiver on the hook. "It will be served by representatives of the local police, returnable in Beverly Hills."

It was Liddell's turn to register surprise. He walked over, picked the warrant from between Harrigan's fingers, read it, looked up. "You've got it made out in her name. You knew all the while?"

Harrigan grinned at him. "We're only a small force by comparison, but we get around."

Liddell glowered at him. "Talk about underestimating somebody!"

The door opened, two plainclothesmen came in. Harrigan

handed them the warrant. The blonde stared around the room for a moment, then fought for her composure.

"Oh, well, let's get it over with. I can't wait to see whether I killed in a moment of temporary insanity or in self-defense." She got up, swivel-hipped over to the two plainclothesmen, tucked her hands in the crook of their arms. She looked over at Liddell.

"Don't think it hasn't been nice, mister," she said. "Because it hasn't."

The two detectives took her out of the room, closed the door after them. As soon as she had gone, Mickey Curren shook his head. "I've known a lot of killers in my day," he said wonderingly. "But that babe could give them all cards and spades." He got to his feet. "Any reason you want me to stay?"

Liddell shook his head. "I just needed your part of the picture."

The white-haired man started for the door, stopped. He turned. "I never liked you, shamus. You know that?" He squinted. "I guess I'm getting old. I got to hand it to you the way you handled this one."

Liddell scowled. "You got any posies, give them to the lieutenant. He's been a mile ahead of me all the way, letting me run his errands and do his dirty work."

Curren shook his head. "Imagine. That babe." He shook his head again. "You sure coulda fooled me." He nodded toward Cruze and his wife and left.

"Thank you, Mr. Liddell." Rita Cruze disentangled her hand from her husband's, walked over, offered it to Liddell. "I not only owe you my thanks, I owe you my apologies. Here, all the time, I thought you were our enemy and you were really working for us."

She turned, smiled at the lieutenant. "I would have slept a lot easier, if I'd known you were as sure of us as you were."

Harrigan sighed. He reached into his pocket, brought out another folded paper. "I wasn't. This one is made out in the name of Rita Cruze," he told her.

The woman's eyes widened, dropped from Harrigan's face to the paper in his hand. "A warrant for my arrest? For murder?" She turned, ran back to her husband, who held her against him.

Mac Gold stood up. He looked to the lieutenant. "You want me for anything, lieutenant?"

Harrigan shook his head. "Maybe Liddell does."

The stunt man turned to Johnny. The eyes under the layer of scar tissue were wary. "How about you, mister?"

Liddell touched the sore spot on his chin. "You owe me something for the other day at the Dresden," he grunted. "You jumped me when I wasn't looking." He eyed the hulking shoulders, the broken

knuckles of the other man's hands, the scar tissue over his eyes. "But I'll settle if you'll give Myrna a break. The kid's crazy about you and had nothing to do with my walking in on you."

Gold snorted. "You got something on me for a killing or some law I broke, then you can tell me what to do. I need advice about my love life, I'll write to Doris Blake." He bobbed his head at the lieutenant, followed the others out of the room.

"Well, I guess that wraps it up," Liddell grinned. "Dear Abby has nothing to worry about from me."

"Maybe the feature pages of the local papers don't have anything to worry about, but the front pages sure do," Harrigan told him. He checked his watch. "By now, Harry Stanton is filling in the local boys on the whole case. He was only waiting to find out which of the two warrants I served. So, if you don't mind waiting here until the local boys have a chance to get the story into rewrite—"

The phone on the desk rang, Cruze lifted it to his ear. "Who?" He held it out to Harrigan. "For you, lieutenant," he said, with a slight frown.

Harrigan held the phone to his ear. "Yeah? Yeah, Stanton." The smile on his face slowly faded. He stared at Liddell with stricken eyes. "But how could they? How —" He nodded weakly. "Okay. Handle it the best you can."

He dropped the receiver on its hook, stared at Liddell.

"Something wrong, lieutenant?" Liddell wanted to know.

"The *Dispatch* in New York gave the whole story to the wire services over an hour ago. The local sheets got it on the wire before they showed up for the press conference. They're giving Stanton hell."

Liddell grinned complacently.

"But how?" Harrigan wanted to know.

Liddell indicated Muggsy who was sitting primly on the couch. "Muggs fed them the whole story last night after we left Harten's place. All I had to do this morning was check the insurance company for the motive. On the way here, I put in a call. It was already in type, ready to roll when I called. It's on the streets already back there."

Harrigan made a few uncomplimentary remarks under his breath, made no attempt to stop Liddell as he offered his arm to Muggsy and they walked triumphantly out of the office.

That night, Johnny Liddell and Muggsy Kiely walked hand in hand down the Strip, enjoying the sights like a couple of tourists.

"Are you sure you have to go back home, Johnny?" she asked after a few minutes' silence.

Liddell grinned. "I think it might be a good idea. I'm not like-

ly to win any popularity prizes out here."

"I'm going to miss you," the redhead admitted. "It's always so damn dull when you're not around. When are you going?"

"I asked the clerk to get me out on an early flight tomorrow. So, tonight is my last night." He glanced at her.

She groaned. "And I suppose you want to see a strip show?"

"I had entertained the notion. Okay with you?"

The redhead shrugged. "I guess you earned the right to call the shots on your last night in town. There's a really fancy spot down the next block calls itself the House of Strip. Want to go there, Johnny?"

"Sounds promising."

They walked to the next corner where a tattered canvas banner announced, LILI, *the Queen of the Strip—Twice Nightly*. The place looked dark, Liddell walked over, pressed his nose against the glass door.

"Looks like—"

"Oh, oh. Take a look, Johnny." Muggsy pointed to a sign pasted on the far door. He walked over and read: THE HOUSE OF STRIP ON THE STRIP—*Clothed for Alterations.*

"For alterations?" Liddell grunted. "What's that mean? They going to open with Christine Jorgensen?"

"It's probably just as well," Muggsy said. "It's like I always say—"

"I know, I know. If you've seen one naked woman, you've seen them all."

"I was going to suggest you come up to my place. I have something unique I wanted to show you before you left."

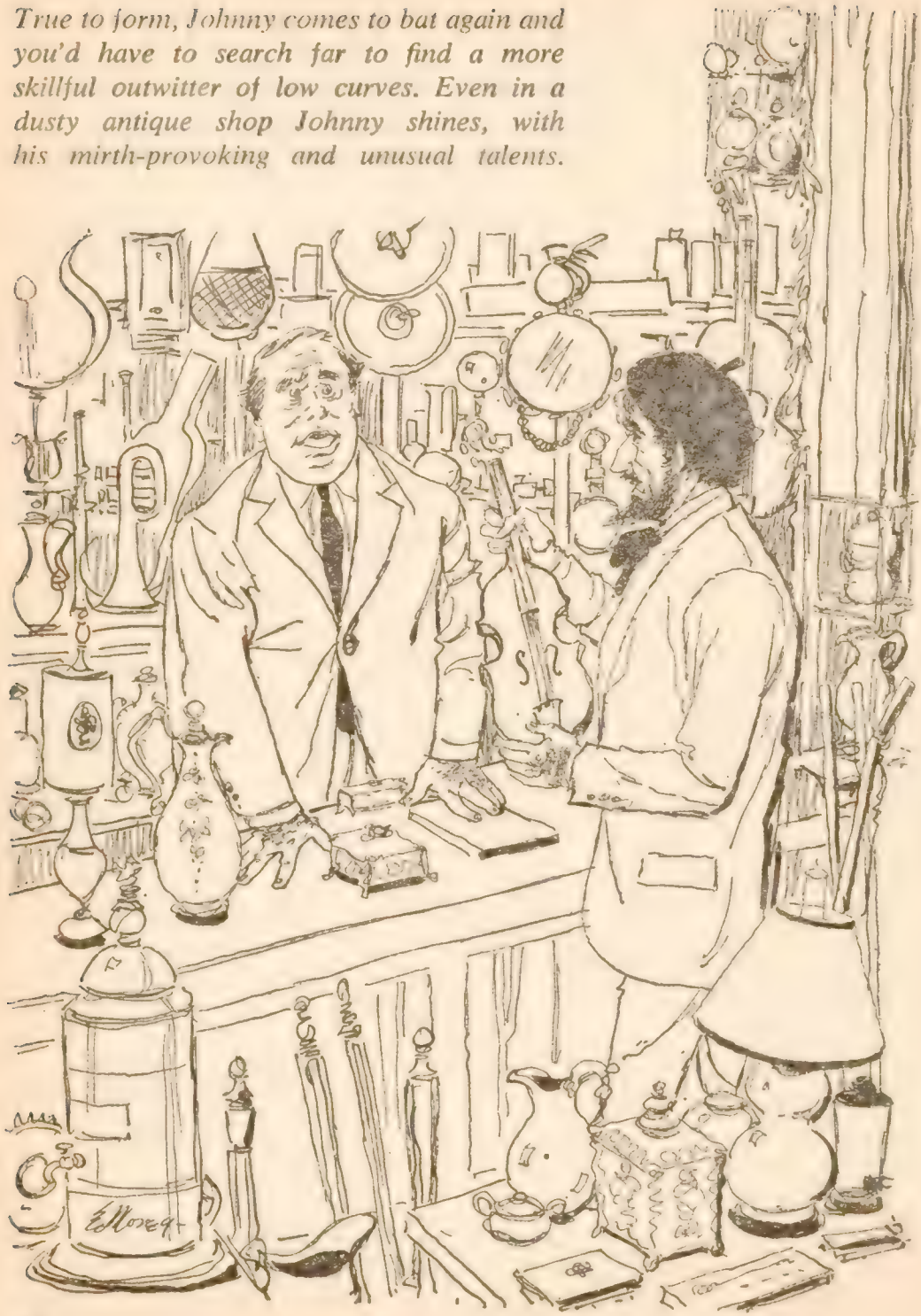
Liddell grinned. "Now that's the first suggestion I—"

"A bottle of one hundred-fifty year-old Napoleon brandy. The only brandy that old in Hollywood."

Liddell nodded weakly. "Oh." He permitted her to take him by the arm, drag him back up the Strip toward where his car was parked. He offered no resistance —it wasn't every night he was invited to a girl's apartment for a drink of 150-year-old brandy!

A New MIKE SHAYNE Novelet Next Month

True to form, Johnny comes to bat again and you'd have to search far to find a more skillful outwitter of low curves. Even in a dusty antique shop Johnny shines, with his mirth-provoking and unusual talents.



Fiddling Around

A NEW, *JOHNNY, THE EDGE* STORY

by LEW LIPTON

SORRY JOHNNY," said the Professor, an elderly grey-haired character hard-bitten by the gambling bug, as we sat in the lobby of the Gramercy Park Hotel where I had met him as per appointment. "I'm sorry but I can't pay you that eight grand I owe you."

"But you lost it fair and square, old timer," I, Johnny, the Edge reminded him. "I never thought you'd welsh on your marker."

"To tell you the truth, Johnny," he replied, "I never had any intention of welshing and I'll take an oath that I've never welshed before in all my life. Ask anybody."

"I don't have to," I admitted, "because I checked. But after all, eight big one's is a lot of cabbage and I can't afford to take that kind of loss."

"You've got to admit, Johnny, that I gave you all the cash I had after you broke the bank in the chemin de fer game. Over three thousand, so the only thing I can do now is offer you what I consider a fair proposition until I can pay you the balance."

"Start talking" I advised, "I'm listening."

He polished his specs, and heaved a deep sigh. "Nobody

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knows it, but I own an antique shop on lower Fifth Avenue. My daughter Jane runs it for me and we've always made a very fine living out of selling phony antiques to rich suckers, so if you'll be a good sport, which everyone knows you are, I'll deed my shop over to you until I pay you what I owe you, with the understanding that after I do, you'll return it to me. Fair enough?"

"Sounds okay, Professor. But what do I know about antiques? Nothing!"

"You know as much about them as most of the buyers", he assured me. "And being the super-salesman you are, you should clean up handsomely. You can keep the profits besides, as interest."

"Where do you get the antiques?" I inquired.

"My store is full of them," he replied, "and whenever I run short I know how to make them. Especially period furniture which is always in great demand."

"*Make* them?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Sure Johnny," he confessed. "Tell you what you do. Come along with me and I'll show you how. It might be interesting."

Curiosity got the better of me, so I went.

Ye Old Antique Shoppe was a very neat and attractive place right on the Avenue. The location was perfect to lure the rich suckers who lived in the neighboring hotels, and apartment houses.

"What a racket!" I thought, beginning to see the beauty of it.

It was an open secret that the Professor was a highly educated man and spoke several different languages fluently, but no one ever knew or even suspected that he also was an artist and an expert cabinet maker who had the uncanny knack of reproducing expensive antique furniture with the sure-fire skill of painters who duplicate old masters and sell them as originals.

Jane was a charming, highly educated and sweet young lady. Not like those sugary TV actresses who are so sweet they could give you diabetes. Jane was the real thing and I soon learned, a convincing saleslady.

To say I was pleasantly surprised in my new adventure is putting it mildly, especially after the Professor took me down to the basement, showed me several high-backed Louis Sixteenth chairs, recently made, and then gave me a fast demonstration on how he antiqued them.

First, he took a rifle, stepped back several feet and fired buckshot into a newly made chair.

"Those will be worm holes," he explained with authority.

Next he took various cans containing stain, mahogany in color, varnish, et cetera, and applied each with lightning-like rapidity.

"That chair will end up looking like the real McCoy by the time I'm through with it," he assured me. "But I'll have to stain and rub it down several more times."

As he spoke he continued doing the job, even rubbing gold leaf into various parts of it. He covered the back and seat with ancient pieces of red material that he tacked in place with small bronze-like square-headed nails. Each piece bore a crest—a dull gold coat of arms.

I watched his upholstering in wide-eye amazement, as he stepped back and smiled.

"What will that chair sell for now?" I asked.

"Six or seven hundred dollars," he said with a chuckle.

"Some racket," I declared and grinned in complete admiration.

"Well, how about it Johnny?" he asked.

"How about what?" I inquired, momentarily forgetting what I came there for.

"My proposition to you," he reminded me. "You know, the money I owe you. The deed to this store."

"It's a deal!" I replied. "But forget the deed. I'll take your word."

As we clasped hands to seal it, he confided, "I need a vacation anyway, so now I'm going away for a good rest. Jane will remain in the store and I'll instruct her to help you in every way possible. She's most capable, I assure you."

"That I know," I replied.

"And don't forget what Caesar once said over two thousand years ago."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'd sooner be right in the minority," he quoted, "than be wrong in the majority."

After a brief confidential chat with Jane he left.

"Good luck!" I called after him.

Jane too, was a brilliant conversationalist like her father and I felt highly flattered when she made me her confident.

"How and when did that happen Jane?" I asked after she related an almost unbelievable experience with a hock-shop keeper. This was later when we were alone.

"Recently," she replied. "About a month ago. He promised to notify me in plenty of time so I could redeem it but realizing it was worth far more than I pawned it for he took advantage of the situation."

"In other words you hocked it for fifty bucks to help your old man out because you knew he got in debt gambling."

"Exactly, Mr. Webb. I could have gotten much more for it but I figured it would be easier for me to redeem it for fifty dollars, so as I told you, when I had the money ready the pawnbroker really did the unexpected and claimed that my ticket had expired just a few

days before. Furthermore he maintained that he never promised to notify me in ample time, which was an out and out lie."

"The louse!" I exploded, now steamed up. "But just leave it to me Jane and I'll dope out a way to get even with that crooked small-change grabber."

"He was very insulting and sarcastic too," she continued, "because when I tried to explain that the ring was a graduation gift from Dad, he cut me short saying, 'I know! I know! It was a present from your dear dead husband or your dear dead father!' How do you like that?"

"I don't," I snapped. "But after all, all of those babies are the same. Parasites. Everyone of them. All they'll ever give you is a biscuit for a barrel of flour or a canoe for a battlecruiser. By the way, does the Professor know about it?"

"No," she replied, "and please don't ever tell him Mr. Webb because I, too, know it was illegal and wouldn't think of worrying him."

"I won't," I promised, "rest assured of that."

As a lady entered the shop we naturally dropped the subject. The customer explained that she wanted to purchase a small tapestry of Turkish design of which they had none.

However, by the time that Jane was through charming her she purchased a highly lacquered Chinese screen which Jane inferred was a real antique of the Ming dynasty, but later confessed, after the purchaser had gone, that her father had made it one Sunday morning when he had nothing else to do.

The sale netted $550.00 which was far better than walking around in the hot sun without a hat on. When Jane offered me the money to reduce her father's indebtedness which she obviously knew all about, I refused to take it, figuring that the education I was getting was priceless.

In fact, I was already willing to nullify his marker because of her, fully aware that she was being penalized because of his gambling weakness which is the worst disease in the world, although I had always profited handsomely and scored often from the suckers who were afflicted with it.

The next morning I could hardly wait until I got to the shop because I had doped out an edge, but a good one, to get even with the pawn broker and all I needed was Jane's okay to go into action.

"I've got an idea that I'd like to fiddle around with Jane," I began and then explained what it was.

She was not only interested but highly amused. When I concluded she declared, "If you can do it, you're a genius!"

With mock boastfulness I extended my hand and said, "Then

shake with a genius!" And added, "I like nothing better than to cheat a cheater."

Her laughter was contagious.

I phoned, met, then went into a huddle with an old pal who was a real smart operator. I just had to enlist his aid because Rudy, which was his tag, had earned the rep as being a past master in the art of theatrical makeup.

Plans and details were as carefully worked out as a Brinks job. Then we parted.

As "Yours truly" passed the hockshop on 8th Avenue where Jane had been double-crossed, I carried a violin case under one arm. Then I stopped as if attracted by the various items that decorated the show cases in the windows, especially the musical instruments, and there were many.

Obviously the old cheater had pegged me from the inside but when I entered he froze up and pretended that he hadn't. From Jane's description I knew I had the right cheater, because he had more lines in his face than Jack Barrymore ever had on the stage.

Slowly and carefully I extracted a violin from my case and informed him, "This is one of the finest violins ever made. And very valuable too. I bought it many years ago in Europe—Italy to be exact—from a concert master. How much can I hock it for?"

Looking over the expensive tailored threads I always wore, he

apparently cased me as a coupon-clipping playboy in temporary distress. In a cagey manner he purred, "How much do you want?" Then eyed me like the suspicious old bat that he was.

"I'm temporarily embarrassed," I confessed like a rank sucker, "so I figure that if I only take twenty dollars, not only will I avoid difficulty in redeeming it, but my usual check will arrive from my broker by that time."

He breathed a sigh of relief, having figured I'd want much more, then forced a smile that was reminiscent of a constipated Bela Lugosi. "You can have more than that for your fiddle," he assured

in benevolent manner after appraising it carefully. "Five or even ten dollars more!"

"Thanks for your generosity," I replied, "but twenty dollars is all I really need until my check arrives. I'll redeem it then."

Reluctantly the cold-blooded cheater gave me the double sawbuck and hock ticket. On it I signed the name of John Webb. I also jotted down my phone number as prearranged with Jane. It was the number of the Antique Shoppe. I had previously cued her that in case he called to say that she was my wife and not to give out any information whatsoever. That was part of the plot I had worked out with her.

As I started to leave, my hand resting on the handle of the door, I suddenly turned and warned, "Don't try and sell my violin because my cousin works in the District Attorney's office and if you do there'll be hell to pay!"

"Don't worry about that part of it, my good friend," he replied, "I never do those things. Your fiddle will be safe. I'm strictly legitimate."

I suppressed a smile at his crack and as I left he was hanging up my violin in the window with the other musical instruments. Among the group of cheap looking violins.

Later that day, Rudy affecting a real goateed beatnik makeup enhanced with black wig, and a brown beret, such as hopped-up Greenwich Village Bongo-drummers wear, passed, stopped to gander at the window display, then entered. With that kind of outfit the old cheater could only have figured that if he turned his pockets inside out not more than two nickels would have fallen out.

"Whaddya want?" he asked brusquely reverting to type.

"I'd like to buy a violin," replied Rudy, softly.

"Whaddya wanna pay?"

"Any price," informed Rudy. "That is if I can get a good one."

With that he opened his wallet which was stuffed with green bills but little of it negotiable. When the cheater saw what he thought was a real bankroll his attitude instantly changed.

He began showing him the "fiddles" as he called them, all but the one I had recently hocked. But Rudy shook his head in disapproval at each and every one.

Finally he exclaimed, "Show me that violin over there," indicating the one I had left a few hours previously.

"That one is not for sale," he said.

"Nevertheless I'd like to see it," Rudy insisted.

Reluctantly the hock dealer handed it over to him. Carefully and like a true artist Rudy examined it closely. Every detail. Then he exclaimed, "I'll give you fifty dollars for it."

The broker shook his head, "Impossible," he said, "I told you that I can't sell it. Not until the party who pawned it fails to redeem it."

"One hundred!" countered Rudy ignoring the information and still studying the violin closely.

"No!"

"Three hundred and fifty."

The old cheater gasped. His beady little eyes filled with unmistakable larceny. But again he reluctantly shook his head as Rudy continued his minute examination and inspection of the instrument.

"I like the scroll," he mused audibly observing the head, "also the 'F' holes and the varnish." Then he looked into the belly or inside of it and discovered a bit of white paper stuck to it. "You know," he said to himself but half aloud, "I think this a very valuable musical instrument."

He suddenly turned to the pawnbroker whose eyes were now popping like a barracuda out of water and asked, "Do you know where this was made or where it came from?"

"Some part of Europe," gulped the cheater. "Yes, Italy."

"Then that's it." snapped Rudy in delighted manner. "Tell you what I'll do!"

"What's that?"

"I'll give you five hundred dollars for it!"

"I told you that I can't sell it," the cheater repeated weakly after he regained his speech.

"All right then," exclaimed Rudy, "here's my best and last offer. I'll give you one thousand spot cash for it. Now take it or leave it."

Again he opened his leather and flashed the phony bunch of bills that looked like legal tender.

"Tell you what I'll do, friend," said the pawnbroker, "I'll phone my friend who pawned it and if he'll sell it I'll let you know."

"When?" asked Rudy anxiously.

"I'll phone him later so drop around sometime tomorrow."

"Good!" gasped Rudy still putting on the daffy musician act, "and I'll give you an extra hundred for your trouble".

"Do I understand that you want to pay one thousand dollars for the fiddle, is that it?"

"Right!" said Rudy. "And spot cash too. I've got a contract to play at a concert. I'd like to use it." With that he flashed a phony contract made out by me. After which he started toward the door, turned and called back "So long, good friend, and thanks for your trouble."

"So long my friend," echoed the pawnbroker.

Naturally, Rudy checked with me at once, so I was fully prepared with all of the answers.

"It's for you, Mr. Webb," said Jane an hour later as she covered the mouthpiece of the phone and

offered me the receiver. As I started over she said to the person on the other end, "My husband will be right here, hold the wire please."

As I took the receiver she whispered, "It's him."

I nodded, took the phone and cheerfully asked, "Hello, who is it?"

His was a determined but wasted effort of trying to buy my violin for three hundred bucks and finally he was up to five hundred, but when I said I had a hum in my ear and couldn't hear him, he went to six hundred, and even raised the ante to seven hundred, obviously anxious to clip me for the difference to one grand.

I finally said, "My wife and I are leaving the city for a week or so but if you give me eight hundred spot cash, I'll sell it to you. But right away."

Delighted, he agreed so I added, "I'll be over in fifteen or twenty minutes," then hung up.

Jane had overheard my entire conversation so her face was wreathed in smiles. "You're sure a wonder," she gasped in admiration.

"That's what they all say," I replied in a kidding manner, "and exactly what I modestly admitted before."

"WELL UNCLE, here I am," I said as I entered the hockshop, "so don't be backward about coming forward." As I gabbed I stretched out my hand for the dough.

"And here's your money" said the cheater as he reluctantly handed me eight fresh one-century notes.

As I stuffed them in my kick he handed me an agreement to sign giving him complete ownership of the violin, after which I bowed out laughing to myself as I pictured him waiting for Rudy to appear with the "G" note to buy it from him.

"I've got good news for you Jane," I said as I entered *Ye Old Antique Shoppe.*

"And I've got good news for you too, Mr. Webb," she exclaimed with a smile.

"Here's mine," I said producing the roll of century notes. Keep five of them to buy a new ring, because I feel that my pal Rudy is entitled to three for helping us, don't you think so?"

"Positively," she agreed. "And here's yours Robin Hood," she countered handing me a Western Union money order for eight grand.

"Where did you get this and what is it for?" I asked in surprise.

"Dad won it on his vacation and wired it to me to give to you," she informed me joyfully.

"How," I inquired, "not in chemin de fer?"

"No," she said, "on the horses."

"Horses!" I echoed in amaze-

ment. "Where is he vacationing at?"

"Saratoga," she replied excitedly. "He just phoned and told me that an old friend of his who owns racehorses won both the first and second races so Dad beat a big Daily Double. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Sure is!" I declared with a broad grin. "And I'm delighted to hear it."

"I know you are," she said, "and what do you think the Daily Double was?" she asked breathlessly.

"I can't imagine."

"Eight and Eight were the winning numbers and the horses names were—"

I interrupted, "Hurry up, Jane, and tell me!"

"'Antique' won the first, and 'Fiddle Around' won the second!"

"What a hunch," I enthused, "and now the Professor has redeemed *Ye Old Antique Shoppe,* although he never lost it as far as I'm concerned. I never accepted his deed."

"I know that Mr. Webb," she said softly, "and you know that my Dad would never welsh on you or anyone else."

"That I know Jane," I assured her, then started to leave.

"Thanks a million, Mr. Webb," she called after me.

Her eyes moistened as she blew me a kiss.

"THE EDUCATION OF JOHNNY THE EDGE"

by Lew Lipton

The New Johnny Webb Story for Next Month

The killer's victim was unknown to him. But it was going to be a dangerous subway ride . . . for someone.

THE JOSTLERS

by MICHAEL ZUROY

OLIVER BEEMIS finally decided that the next person who pushed him in the subway was going to die. It was not a sudden decision—nor an unconsidered one. Any decision twenty-eight years in the making is obviously neither sudden nor unconsidered.

Oliver was forty-eight years old. He had been riding the New York subways since he was twenty, twice a day, morning and night —like most of the city's other wage-earners. At forty-eight, Oliver was a slim dark man, a little below medium height, with curly black hair. His features were so fine and regular that it was hard to remember them. One noticed first his coldly glittering eyeglasses, then perhaps glanced at the man.

Oliver had always been a reserved individual. He did not like situations which brought him into close contact with others, either

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mentally or physically. His wife was a bleak woman, which suited him well. Their only child, a girl, was raised in so cold a parental atmosphere that she left home at eighteen to marry, which also pleased Oliver by freeing him of an embarassing intimate relationship.

On the New York subways, however, he was forced into close physical contact with masses of strangers, sometimes sweaty, unwashed and stinking. Twice a day other flesh touched his no matter how hard he tried to shrink away. Breath from other bodies went into his nostrils and lungs. Filthy clothes from many noisome closets mashed his own crisp attire.

Across the years Oliver had managed to make a painful adjustment. He was not an unfair man. He realized that the other passengers had no choice. They were all in the same predicament, forced to use the crowded subways day in and day out.

But the trouble was that they also pushed. They jostled, butted, shouldered, hurtled, elbowed, lunged. They even kicked.

That he could not endure.

Pushing and shoving was not only contact, but insult. Deliberate, unprovoked disrespect. A violation of his innermost privacy.

It put him into a vicious fury, and it happened every day.

For twenty-eight years he had been edging towards his decision. He was a rational being, but he knew that eventually he would have to unleash the chocked-up rage within him.

Before he finally decided to kill, he had already made his plans. He had spent a great many hours in analyzing just what errors to avoid—just how much skill and planning it would take to get away with murder in the subway.

From the start he knew that the job would have to be done in an inconspicuous and swift manner. He was too concerned with his own safety to care for bravado.

Oliver examined and discarded many ideas. Pushing the chosen victim off the platform into the path of an oncoming train, for example, he did not consider satisfactory. Although such a direct method was simple and fairly safe, and could be made to look like an accident—in the confusion he could probably walk away—it would depend too much upon the element of chance. The victim would have to obligingly place himself at the edge of the platform. Oliver did not care to let chance bulk so large in his calculations.

One of the conclusions to which Oliver eventually came was that the execution should be accomplished during the brief period when the train was taking on and discharging passengers. This was the time of greatest confusion, when the hordes straining to get in

and out were oblivious to everything else that was taking place around them. If his timing were right, as soon as he delivered the death-blow the closing doors would separate the victim from himself and the train would roar off, rapidly putting miles between them.

There remained the problem of a suitable weapon. It must be quiet, neat, blending perfectly with the subway environment, unrecognizable as a weapon. A gun or knife obviously did not fill these requirements.

In a cool analytical manner, Oliver pondered this problem. What objects were common in the subway? Newspapers, of course. And along with newspapers, pencils. People often did crossword puzzles in the subway. Even in crowded cars, in a wretched bit of space, they wrote on newspapers folded up small. Very well then. He would carry a newspaper and a pencil.

It would be a mechanical pencil, but there would be no pencil lead inside it. There would be instead—a sting. A long, sharp steel needle, blackened to resemble the lead it had replaced, that could be advanced and retracted at will. And since it must kill surely but slowly, it must be coated with a suitable deadly poison.

Such a lethal sliver would penetrate easily through clothing. A slight jab should be sufficient. It would register as no more than a tiny sting, hardly felt, perhaps unnoticed in the rush-hour turmoil.

But if the victim did feel the hurt—if he or anyone else noticed the thrust of the pencil—it would seem the merest accident. A pencil point had unintentionally been poked into someone. Annoying, perhaps, but scarcely worth fussing about.

And if his timing were right, the crush of bodies would separate Oliver from his victim anyway, and the sliding doors would close between them. And the following morning, Oliver would have the pleasure of reading in the newspapers about a mysterious death in the subway.

Yes, it seemed quite safe.

Oliver did a good deal of careful research on poisons before he chose one. It was a little-known substance that, introduced under the skin, would bring death in eight or ten minutes. A few minutes would provide a more than sufficient margin of safety in which to make good his escape.

Acquiring some of the poison without running the risk of its being traced later on was a delicate operation. But Oliver enjoyed this, and accomplished it successfully.

Therefore, when Oliver finally decided to kill, he was completely prepared, as he had been for months.

At 5:04 p.m. one evening in late June, Oliver left the import-

ing firm where he had been employed for twenty years—in recent months as a minor executive—and entered the subway at the Canal Street station. Even that far downtown, the trains were already packed.

He entered a subway car and at once found himself crushed into the contact he detested. He tightened his lips and held his folded newspaper against his chest, opened to a half-finished crossword puzzle. In his other hand he held the deadly pencil, its point retracted into the barrel. He could now advance it in a split second, for he had practiced manipulating the pencil with one hand.

The doors closed, and the train swiftly took on speed, making a sounding chamber of the dark tunnel, wrapping itself in a dull roar. The chill light emphasized the drabness of the car. Only the advertisements seemed to possess life, vibrancy. The faces of the passengers looked blank and withdrawn, as did Oliver's. But underneath Oliver's dull-eyed, almost masklike expression lay a cold anticipation.

The train slowed and stopped at the packed platform of the West Fourth Street station. The doors opened, and the boiling upheaval of people began. Oliver allowed a slight smile to play about his lips. Now, he thought, let's see.

Somebody jostled Oliver violently.

He turned, ready to strike, but held back. He had been pushed by a skinny man in a shabby brown jacket who was trying to get out. He could see at once that the jostling had been accidental. The man was simply trying to get out before the doors closed.

Oliver was not after this type. It was the deliberate jostlers who filled him with rage, the ones who had no respect for others.

The doors closed again. The train slid away from the station, gathering speed even more rapidly than before, rocking a little from side to side.

Oliver noticed that several people in the car were holding folded newspapers close to their chests, reading or working on crossword puzzles. Oliver smiled grimly and touched the tip of his own pencil to the paper he was only pretending to read. He was well camouflaged, he assured himself again.

Fourteenth Street. The crush grew tighter. It was no longer possible to write, but Oliver held the crossword puzzle in evidence against his chest, waiting for the man who had an appointment with death. Oliver felt an infinite patience. He would come. He would surely come.

Twenty-Third Street. A few passengers elbowed their way out and more wedged in. Oliver was pressed still further into the car.

The train thundered into the 34th Street station, a dim place of

steel and concrete, the platform churning with people, two-thirds of them men. The crowds were so thick here that trains following each other a few yards apart were totally unsuccessful in diminishing the crush.

Oliver saw him coming. He knew instantly that this was the one. He was a broad man with a coarse-featured, surly face, and light pitiless eyes. He bulled through the crowd, shouldering aside men and women indiscriminately, intent only on reaching the nearest opening door. Oliver waited, calmly, frigidly.

The man's shoulder struck him a glancing blow, jarring him from head to foot. And the man drove past, coming to a halt a couple of feet away. Very well, Oliver thought. This one will die.

The weight of the weapon was light and pleasant in Oliver's hand. An agreeable tremor touched his spine.

He had only to wait until the man left the train. He would follow him to the door, deliver his lethal sting and wriggle back.

If the man continued on for several station, it would mean only a slight change of plan. Oliver himself would leave, maneuvering past the man, striking, and letting the mob bear him out.

Nobody would suspect that an accidental jab with a pencil could be a death blow, Oliver thought again with satisfaction.

Forty-Second Street.

The man started out.

Oliver had not expected that he would get off at the very next station. Frantically, he manipulated his pencil, advancing the point. But by the time he was ready his intended victim had shouldered his way out of the train, and there was someone else between them —a slight individual in a neat gray business suit carrying a newspaper.

Oliver cursed his habit of woolgathering and dove after the jostler, elbowing his way, trying to get close enough to stab. But he couldn't get past the passenger in the gray suit. The jostler was halfway across the platform when Oliver managed to squeeze through the already closing doors in his wake. The man must not escape. He would follow him to the end of the line, if necessary.

Oliver's quarry did not go far. He rested his beefy back against one of the steel columns, waiting. Apparently he meant to change to one of the other lines that stopped at this platform. Oliver sidled close to the man, holding the pencil ready. He would not miss another opportunity. As the man battered through the crowd into his car, he would let him have it.

The rumble of distant trains welling through the tunnels never ceased here. The brightly-worn tracks disappearing into the darkness made Oliver feel dizzy.

He moved his head in a couple of quick, bird-like turns, trying his best to concentrate on his surroundings. A brightly-lit newsstand nearby, a stairway. The platform, packed almost solid with people. Near the edge, he recognized other passengers who had just left the train he had been on. There was the slight man in the gray suit, still jotting at his newspaper.

Two lights, far down the track, were rushing nearer. Oliver's breath caught, and he edged closer to his quarry.

The train roared in, came to a grinding halt. The doors opened and people poured out. There would be a sudden surge the other way even before they were through leaving. He was sure of that, and it would give him his opportunity.

The surge came. Oliver was alert, prepared, and there was no reason why he should have failed this time. Perhaps he didn't quite realize how powerful the jostler was, and how fast he could move.

Before Oliver could strike, the man was passing through the doors, shielded by other bodies. Desperately, Oliver flung himself into the mob. He'd lost another chance, but he must not let his quarry escape. He must get into the train with him, must keep on trying.

He barely got past the closing doors. He elbowed through the crowd, seeking the man. There were others in his way. The same man in the gray suit was blocking him. Irritated, he shouldered his way deeper into the car.

Ah, there he was!

Breathing hard, Oliver took a firm grip on his pencil. He was determined now, absolutely. The brute must not escape.

Fifty-Ninth Street. The jostler did not get off.

The train settled down for the long run to 125 Street.

Oliver relaxed a little. There was some time to wait. As the minutes passed, he found himself settling into the dreamy state of the subway passenger—a state of semi-lethargy induced by the monotony, the swaying motion, the dull roar, the dreary interior, the bleak lights. Apathetically, he stared at the people before him.

Inches from his eyes was the back of a man's neck. The neck had three rough horizontal creases and a stray diagonal crease. The hair grew in a curious fuzzy way and disappeared into a brown hat with a stain on the brim. The man's raised right hand was holding onto a strap, and when the hand swayed the neck swayed with it.

To one side, a woman held on. She was wearing a light orange coat with a black trim. Gray hair lined her neck. Her arms bulged in her sleeves. To the other side, a slender young girl whose perfume reached Oliver, making his nostrils twitch.

Forced directly against Oliver's right arm was the man in the gray suit, apparently absorbed in his newspaper, apparently unaware of discomfort—a seasoned rush-hour traveler. Oliver's left flank was crushed against a very tall, black-suited young man, hatless, bow-tied, with a long bony face.

Just past this young man stood the jostler, holding on to a post, in the choice, comparatively comfortable position to which he had battered his way, his broad face inscrutable.

Yes, thought Oliver, they took the best spots, these jostlers. The posts, the straps, the seats.

They pushed human flesh aside as though it held no spirit. Oliver felt the hate surging up in him again, making it almost impossible for him to breathe. He hated them all, all the different types of jostlers.

For there were different types. The worst were the batterers, the ones who rammed you with the full weight of their bodies, like the man he was going to kill. But the others were almost as bad. Some insinuated themselves alongside you, then levered you out of the way, off balance. Some were hip users, swinging from side to side, clearing a path. Some elbowed, using the sharp parts of their anatomy to hurt you.

Some heavy ones crushed with their sheer inexorable weight. Some leaned on you, slowly crushing you down. There were women who kicked with sharp-pointed shoes. Or who swung metal-edged pocketbooks.

A change in the sound and motion of the train brought Oliver alert again. Yellow lights were flashing by. The train was slowing for the 125th Street station.

The fingers of Oliver's hand turned the barrel of his pencil and the deadly needle advanced.

The train squealed to a stop. New hordes of people stoically waiting showed through the windows. The doors slid open.

Oliver turned his head. Yes, his quarry was coming. To his death, for Oliver was ready.

The mans shoulder struck the tall youth, who staggered aside. For an instant, Oliver was face to face with his intended victim. Now, he thought. But somehow he couldn't strike while the aggressive blue eyes looked into his. He squirmed aside, so that he could get away from the eyes and sting the man from behind. And at that moment the man's shoulder knocked him off balance. With frantic haste he recovered, but his quarry had moved out of reach, past the slight man in the gray suit. The man in the gray suit was blocking him again.

No, thought Oliver savagely, not this time. He would not be thwarted again. He plunged ahead.

The elbow of his left arm caught the gray-suited passenger in the

breast bone. The man fell back, and Oliver hurtled past.

But too late. His quarry was already through the door. Raging, Oliver followed.

He felt somebody's hand between his shoulder blades. The hand pushed violently and Oliver stumbled. In a reflex to protect himself from a fall, his right leg jerked forward and his arms swung and he was barely aware of it when the needle of his pencil penetrated his own thigh. It was only a slight sting.

Oliver whirled. He was able to stand in the doorway just a split second before the mob bore him away.

In that split second he found himself looking into the eyes of the man in the gray suit. They were resentful eyes, the eyes of a man outraged by too close human contact, by too much inconsiderate jostling. In a way, they were something like Oliver's own eyes.

"Elbow me, will you?" snapped the man who had shoved him.

The doors closed. Oliver watched the train take the man away, caught a last resentful look through the window.

Was it possible? Oliver thought. Was it possible that he, himself, had been guilty of elbowing?

But the question instantly left his mind, because he was remembering the sting of the needle. Numbly, he stood on the platform, quarry forgotten, everything forgotten but the knowledge that nothing could be done.

He had less than ten minutes.

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The Restless Redhead

The brunette had brains, wealth and beauty—just about everything in fact. But Mike didn't think she could stay that lucky in the morgue.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MICHAEL SHAYNE LOOKED up from his desk to find his efficient secretary standing before him with an envious expression on her own far from unattractive face. "Michael," Lucy Hamilton said. "She's beautiful."

"Who is, angel?" Shayne growled. "Elisabeth Taylor?"

"No, Michael. Your new client."

"What new client?"

"The brunette sitting in the outer office waiting to see you. She says it's urgent and judging by the bulge of her handbag, she could be carrying a gun. She looks half-frightened to death."

Shayne smiled and then his reddish eyebrows rose in a mild V of surprise. "Don't keep the lady waiting, angel. Show her in."

Lucy nodded and went out.

Within seconds, she had ushered in a tall, willowy brunette. Shayne rose to his feet and waved the prospective client to a chair. He chuckled a little to himself when he noticed that Lucy had left the door slightly ajar. It was unusual for Lucy to eavesdrop, but something about the woman facing him had apparently made her unduly curious.

© 1962, by Brett Halliday

New MIKE SHAYNE thriller

His secretary had been right as to her beauty. The tall brunette had a face and body to rival all of Hollywood's manufactured dreams. Shayne took in an exquisite high-boned face of magnificent lines and feminine perfection. She had crossed superbly-tapered legs, and her right shoe dangled impatiently. Nerves, the redhead surmised. His eyes scrutinized a fashionable dress, simple black sheath with a string of pearls accenting the darkness of her expertly coiffured hair. White gloves, and a black pillbox hat rounded out the immediate impression.

The redhead waited.

"Mr. Shayne, I suppose I should have called—" The brunette's voice was a soft caress of sound.

"That's quite all right," Shayne said easily, checking the black handbag, firmly clasped in one white-gloved hand. "But introductions are in order."

"Oh, of course. So silly of me. My name is Vina Westley. I'd like to retain your services on a confidential matter. You understand?"

Shayne nodded. "That depends on the matter. What is it?"

Vina Westley tried not to bite her lip. "Mr. Shayne, my life has been threatened. I've every reason to believe someone is trying to do me harm. The brakes on my car have been tampered with and there have been—other things. Normally, I'm not skittish but it's got me so far down, I've even taken to carrying a gun."

She added, as if as an afterthought, "I came to you because —well, because you're Michael Shayne. When you're in great trouble, you don't settle for anything but the best. I've been told your reputation is second to none."

If Shayne found the comment flattering, he gave no sign. "Nothing wrong with carrying a gun if you've got a permit and know how to use one," he said. "Why do you imagine someone has it in for you?"

Vina Westley smiled. "I guess you can't do anything until you've heard all the facts," she said. "I'm really not myself these days. You may find it hard to believe, Mr. Shayne, but I'm worth close to a million a year. In cosmetics. I don't use the family name. Surely you may have heard of *Vina Life.*"

Shayne nodded. "I don't imagine any line of beauty products has come up faster these last few years. So you're the woman behind all that! It's not surprising. You're a walking advertisement for the company."

"Thank you, Mr. Shayne." She took a deep breath. "I'm still under thirty, rich, unmarried and I've got an army of people who work for me. And now—I need a bodyguard. I imagine all women as wealthy as I am get threats, but this has gone far beyond the kind of thing you can just shrug off."

Vina Westly hesitated a moment, then went on: "We're planning our Fall campaign and I'm down here in Miami to buy up some property for a factory location. But somebody is trying to ruin me. Or kill me." She paused. "There have been two attempts on my life just in the past few days. You'll understand better when I tell you about it."

The redhead nodded, his expression unfathomable.

"I have a Fiat," Vina Westley continued. "I like a small fast car. Something was done to the brakes. On Tuesday I drove out to the Beach for a spin. The brakes wouldn't work. I like to drive fast. Luckily, I found out about the brakes before I got myself killed speeding." She shivered. "When I checked with one of the service stations on the highway, they said my brakes could only have failed like that if they had been tampered with."

"Go on," Shayne said. "What was the second attempt like?"

Vina Westley passed a hand over her smooth forehead, then composed herself. "I'm a chronic headache type, I eat aspirins by the ton. I had a splitting one on Wednesday, because I'd been out in the sun all afternoon looking over factory sites. When I went to bed that night, I took two before retiring. And they started to hit me faster than they should have. I got panicky. I guess I was still

thinking about those brakes. I called a doctor. He pumped them out of me, and examined the contents of the bottle they came in. Mr. Shayne, he found enough arsenic in the tablets to make me gravely ill."

Shayne nodded. "Not enough to kill, though?"

She blinked. "I imagine that would depend on the amount I took, wouldn't it? After all if I took them all the time, little by little, they would have eventually killed me, wouldn't they?"

"That depends on too many things that I don't know about you yet, Miss Westley. Your tolerance for arsenic, for instance. Some peo-

ple could become immune with intakes of slight amounts over a period of time—" He stopped because he could see he was confusing her. "Why don't you go to the police with this? We have a fine force here in Miami."

"No." Vina Westley's nostrils pinched. "Confidential investigation is what I want. The publicity could make me look foolish if it all leaked out. On the other hand, I'm very much afraid for my life, naturally."

"Naturally," Shayne agreed equably. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm giving a party tonight for some of my staff located here in Miami. And some buyers, of course. Influential big-wigs, people like that. Nobody knows about what I've just told you yet but I'd like you to be there to sort of look around and keep an eye on the guests. I've a feminine, intuitive hunch that, whoever he is, he'll make his attempt at the party. I'd only need you for just this one night. It's a really big party, you see, an *occasion*—"

"A bodyguard?" Shayne interposed mildly.

"Yes, a bodyguard." Vina Westley opened a handbag and laid five green bills on the desk. "Five hundred dollars for one night's work. Does that interest you, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne eyed the bills. "Suppose your fancies turn out to be all foolish?" he asked, intrigued despite himself.

"The money is still yours, Mr. Shayne. Do you accept?"

The redhead nodded in agreement. "Where is the party to be?"

Vina Westley's lovely features relaxed. "I've rented a house on one of the little islands on the Causeway. Your secretary has my address. I'm living alone. No maids or servants. I chauffeur my own car. Can you be there at nine sharp?"

"This doctor—was he a friend of yours or just somebody you dug out of the Classified?"

The lovely eyebrows arched in surprise. "Neither. I drove into town as soon as I felt sick and asked the first policeman I saw to direct me. I went to a general practitioner on the main drag somewhere. I took the bottle with me. If it's important, I could remember his name—"

"No," Michael Shayne said. "It isn't important, right at the moment. Later I may want to talk to him." He got to his feet. "I'll see you at nine sharp, Miss Westley."

When the tall beauty had left, Shayne called Lucy Hamilton into the inner office. The area around Shayne's desk was redolent of a faint, mysterious aroma of perfume.

"Ohhh," Lucy sniffed appreciatively. *"My Night.* I'll bet on it. Only the rich ones can afford that.

It's at least ten dollars an ounce."

Shayne frowned. "I didn't smell it till you mentioned it. Expensive, huh?"

Lucy sighed. "Men! They know, all right, even if a woman has to call it to their attention." She grinned. "What's she like, Michael?"

The redhead turned the five one hundred dollar bills over in his fingers. "Beautiful, nervous, high-handed and just possibly the victim of an overworked imagination."

"What makes you say that, Michael?"

"Never mind, angel," Shayne said. "If it isn't too personal, would you mind telling me what brand of cosmetics you use?"

Lucy Hamilton blinked. Her mouth suddenly formed a round "O" of wonder. "*Vina Life*, of course. Do you mean that's her—Vina? I never connected the name."

"Lucy," Michael Shayne *tsk-tsked*. "You *are* an amateur when it comes to listening at opened doors. She told me that a second after she sat down." He chuckled. "You know, I feel like going to a party tonight at that. Things were getting so dull around here I was getting kind of restless."

"Can't I go too?"

"Sorry, angel. If someone is trying to hurt the lady, I'll have to keep my mind on business. I'd be so busy looking at you, I wouldn't be much good protecting Miss Westley."

Lucy shook her head. "Who'd want to hurt a young, beautiful girl like her? It would be a crime."

"Exactly," Michael Shayne said. "And crime is my business."

II

VINA WESTLEY'S house was a long, rambling ranch-type affair

overlooking one of the small islands on the Miami—Miami Beach Causeway. It was a cloudy night. Still, Shayne had little trouble finding the place. The party in progress lit the house up like a Christmas tree.

As soon as the redhead drove in from the highway, the sounds of music and laughing celebrants hit his ears. Vina Westley had said nine-sharp. Obviously, the party had started much earlier. A bevy of cars filled the parking area below the land-side of the bluff.

Shayne parked and found the wooden stairway which led to the front door. He paused for an instant before starting up, to light a cigarette and take a few quick puffs.

Five minutes after he had entered the house, Michael Shayne was hard-put to remember why he had come. Vina Westley, gorgeous in gold lame slacks and silk blouse, her lovely face radiant, was the life of the party. She had immediately foisted a drink on Shayne and abandoned him to the guests, who were many and diversified.

About twenty five people in all overflowed the chairs and comfortable lounges. The interior of the ranch-like house turned out to be a dozen rooms with that number of spots to hide in.

Shayne was instantly corraled by two sleek, fashionable women in or around their late thirties, who were anxious to find out why such an attractive man was still unmarried. The redhead played the game, yet continually kept his eye on the gay hostess.

He was all too aware of how people could cover a bad case of nerves by wearing the cap and the bells of false humor. Hilarity was the keynote of Vina Westley's demeanor but somehow it didn't wash with the image of the badly-frightened female in the office on Flagler Street.

Shayne cornered her during one of her bubbling tours through the rooms, making the guests feel at home.

"You seem happy enough," he said.

Her smile was heroic, aided by the martini in her slender fingers. "Just an act, Mr. Shayne. Incidentally, there are two people here I'd suggest you watch especially."

"Who?"

She giggled suddenly, for the benefit of an approaching drunk who was reaching for her. "This idiot," she whispered behind the giggle. "Rodney Felton, my business manager." Turning, she smiled at the stoned individual and waved her glass over his head so she wouldn't spill it. "And him, Mr. Shayne." She pointed across the room. "Turner Homeir. Rival firm."

Laughing, she embraced Rod Felton. Shayne saw a youngish man whose brown face hid tiny

wrinkles. Water-blue eyes shone vacantly out of an unimposing face.

Shayne left him to the blandishments of Vina Westley and sauntered across the room, sidestepping a blonde in a too-tight dress who was demonstrating the twist.

Turner Homeir was far more proper game. Shayne smiled at him, nodded and stationed himself at the man's elbow, leaning against a corner of the wall which right-angled into the large living room beyond.

"Well, Shayne," Homeir rumbled in a gravelly voice. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Somewhat." The redhead studied him. "You're Homeir, aren't you? One of Vina's competitors?"

The man smiled blankly. He held no glass. His face was thin and angular, topped by a crew-cut of grey hair. A pencil mustache adorned features as cold and hard as railroad spikes.

"Nobody can touch Vina, Shayne. Oh, I make a little of what she leaves over for the rest of the industry but—" His shrug was eloquent. "The girl is too big now. *Vina Life* is too big. You want a tip, Shayne? Buy some stock. Now. If Vina will let you. I guarantee you in two years time, you'll be rich."

Shayne sipped his drink. "Thanks. I'll ask her."

Homeir laughed. "You'd better clear it with Felton first. She doesn't make a move without him."

Shayne allowed himself to look questioningly across the room where Vina was still talking animatedly to Felton. "You think Miss Westley likes him well enough to marry him?"

Turner Homeir guffawed. "You can't know Vina as well as I assumed you did. No men for that girl. She doesn't need one. Doesn't want one. Thought everybody knew that. Of course, Felton makes enough as her manager but you can just bet he'd like to share the whole pie with her by marrying her."

The redhead looked closely at Turner Homeir. "What about you, Homeir? Wouldn't you like to have some of the action of *Vina Life* instead of having to take leftovers like you say?"

"Mr. Shayne," Homeir stiffened visibly. "Now you're talking through your hat. Maybe you'd better go over there and hold Vi-

na's hand. Looks like Mr. Felton has had one too many."

Turner Homeir was right. Vina was having a little trouble controlling her business manager. Felton was all hands and arms as he tried to give her a drunken kiss.

Shayne moved easily across the room, catching him under the armpits. He did it quietly with no show of haste or force. He swung Felton around. The redhead smiled, making it a drunken smile.

"Come on, Felton. It's my turn to kiss her."

Felton blinked in his face, not recognizing Shayne. The fumes of the whiskey he had consumed almost overpowered the redhead.

Vina Westley laughed. "My, my," she giggled. "Such popularity. I should give these parties more often. The truth comes out in such a delightful way. No stuffy inhibitions or guilt feelings—"

"Vina—" Felton gurgled, ignoring Shayne. "I love you. I want to marry you—"

"So do I," Shayne snapped. "Let's make it a double wedding."

Felton turned back to him, bewildered. "How can we do that? Against the law, isn't it—say, who the hell are you anyway, mister?"

Before Michael Shayne could answer and before the guests could take sides or before Vina Westley could attempt to explain everything, the house lights in the villa went black. Everybody stopped talking immediately. There was a hush. A woman giggled hysterically.

Shayne hung on to Rod Felton. The man wiggled in his grasp.

And then Vina Westley screamed. A high-pitched hysterical wail of terror.

III

MICHAEL SHAYNE moved fast. The prickly sensation of danger hit him like a trip-hammer. The pitch black darkness of Vina Westley's home was somehow shocking. More than just a possibility of electrical failure, it seemed to represent another manifestation of the ugly threats against his client's life. The gay, giddy spirit of a noisy party had dissolved with the first burst of darkness.

Shayne's fingers found the light switch where his memory had left it. He thumbed it quickly. The room lit up instantly, catching a stunning cast of frozen statues at different points of the room.

Vina Westley had stopped screaming. She was standing in the doorway of the house, just to Shayne's left, her lovely fingers closed around her own throat. Rod Felton was on his knees where Shayne had left him, groping around on the floor like a man looking for his glasses.

Turner Homeir was poised in a chair across the room, his legs crossed, his face mildly disturbed by what he seemed to believe was

some drunk's misguided prank. The blonde who had been doing the Twist had split her too-tight dress down one side and was regarding the tear, completely oblivious of the mild panic that had been in progress. The two fashionable brunettes who had bent Shayne's ear all evening were giggling like a pair of schoolgirls now and glancing amorously at unattached males at random.

The rest of the assorted males and females in the other rooms began talking and laughing at the same familiar crescendo as before. The party had hardly been interrupted and Vina Westley's high desperate scream had already joined the limbo of unimportant entertainment.

The redhead reached her in a bound. "You all right?" he whispered. "You screamed—"

Her eyes turned to him, bewildered. "Mr. Shayne, somebody grabbed me. Choked me. And started to drag me out the door in the darkness. When I screamed, they let go—" She swayed. Shayne put his arm about her waist to steady her.

"Easy, Miss Westley. Let me see your neck."

Dumbly, she complied. Angry welts were throbbing prominently, visible now on the soft white of her throat.

Shayne's eyes narrowed. "You need a drink."

"Oh, Mike—" She slid unconsciously into the familiar use of his first name. "Somebody tried to kill me, and drag me out to those steps and throw me down. Who would have suspected it would be anything but an accident?"

"Easy," Shayne cautioned. "Don't tip it. If that's true, you're still in trouble."

She composed herself with an effort. Turner Homeir was coming across the room, smiling. The blonde in the tight dress had wrapped herself around reeling Rod Felton. People were drifting in from the other rooms now. Somebody had turned a record player up. Hi-Fi filled the villa.

"Vina," Homeir purred sympathetically. "Was that you I heard yelling like a schoolgirl in the dark?" He clucked disapprovingly. "Thought you weren't afraid of anything."

"I'm not," she snapped. "But when someone tries to—" Shayne pressed her arm warningly and she stopped. "Forget it, Turner," she went on quickly. "I imagine some of the guests were feeling their drinks and getting amorous."

"Of course," Homeir agreed. "I've often wished to be in a dark room with you myself. And now when the opportunity came, I was a good twenty feet away. Opportunities, opportunities. Always missing them."

"Yes," Vina Westley said heavily. "Just like cosmetics. If you'd been on your toes five years ago,

you could have been where *Vina Life* is now. On top."

"Vina," Homeir said reprovingly, looking at Shayne. "Business in front of strangers?"

She smiled at Michael Shayne. "Mike is no stranger. He happens to be a very good friend of mine. Possibly, the only one I have."

"I'll drink to that," Shayne said, handing her a quick one he had fashioned from a set-up close by.

She took it gratefully and swallowed it in one gulp. Turner Homeir looked at Shayne sadly over his own drink.

"You staying in town, Mr. Shayne? I'll be leaving shortly and I could give you a lift."

"Thanks, no. I drove out myself."

Homeir shrugged. "Well, one more for the road, Vina. And I'll be going." He moved away, threading through the mass of people who seemed to have all gathered in the main room.

Vina watched him go and shivered. "I don't like that man, Mike. I never have."

Shayne nodded. "What time will this bash end?"

"I'm all for throwing them out now. When I think that one of them tried to strangle me—" Her voice fell away to a whisper.

The redhead squeezed her elbow. "Is there another entrance to this place?"

Her eyes arched. "Yes. Two in fact. Staircase on either side. Only the rear is shut off. The water is right at the back door."

"Miss Westley, I'm going now. But I'm coming back in as soon as I make a big show of leaving. I don't intend to leave you alone tonight. Not after what happened. Give me a half hour and then start tossing these drunks out of here. Also, announce to one and all you're leaving Miami in the morning."

"Mike, you think—"

"Vina," Michael Shayne said softly. "If someone really wants to put you in cold storage, I think this is the best time for them to try it. A noisy party can cover up a lot of monkey business."

She paled, then caught herself. "All right. I'll do what you say. But you will come back?" The helpless appeal in her voice reached the redhead.

"Trust me," he said.

As Michael Shayne left the party, waving goodbye to everybody in general and nobody in particular, he reflected that it was amazing that a woman like Vina Westley could control the business world with claws of iron but when it came to her own life, was hopelessly childish in the simple matter of protecting that life.

She was wide-open like a clay pigeon for anyone who wanted to smash her. Her fortune had brought her everything but peace of mind.

Shayne piled into his car, turned the headlights on, raced the motor noisily and drove up the drive that touched the highway, a few hundred feet from the house. He took the turn that led into Miami proper—a turn that put his car out of view of the house.

He parked the car behind a convenient copse of bushes. Quickly and silently, he moved back in the direction of the house. It was a good five minute walk.

He was certain nobody would try anything so soon. Not with all the lights on and especially after having goofed on the first try.

IV

IT TOOK Vina Westley a good hour to send the last noisy guest off to his car. Michael Shayne had enough time to reconnoiter properly.

In the thick darkness of the night, he found the gravel path to the left of the house's base. A long wooden stairway with two levels ran up the side of the building. Shayne found a convenient copse of bushes just to the left of the bottom step, close to the house and hugging the foundation. He made himself comfortable in the gloomy thickets and waited.

Shayne could hear the party noises as they steadily dissipated by degrees. Once he heard Rod Felton's drunken voice, raised contentiously. He was certain the man had not been shamming. The smell of alcohol on his breath had been too real.

Turner Homeir, on the other hand, had been cold sober. There was something deadly about the man as Vina Westley had said. Still, Shayne couldn't be sure about the other guests either. He was certain that Vina hadn't told him everything. She was the kind of woman who could hardly have avoided making female enemies by the score.

Minutes dragged by, punctuated by laughing or maudlin farewells. The silence of the driveway was bombarded by a succession of car motors exploding into life. Shayne watched them drive off. In the darkness, it was hard to tell who was who. Most of Vina Westley's guests had had a snootful. Turner Homeir was the only one who had struck Shayne as remotely sober.

Soon, the driveway was suddenly silent. The change was so startling that Shayne became swiftly taut with expectancy. This was the time to watch. If anyone was going to sneak back, the time would be from now on.

Overhead in the house, he could hear the click of Vina Westley's high heels as she made a hostess' tour of the rooms. Bottles clattered. There was heavy silence again. The redhead strained his ears.

Michael Shayne jerked erect as a sound came to him from the stairway nearby. A board creaked. Someone was going up the back stairs. Shayne eased silently out of the thicket and blended with the darkness cast by the stairway.

The furtive visitor who was entering Vina Westley's house without being re-invited did not surprise him. A shaft of moonlight across the roadway showed the lean, mustached face of Turner Homeir. The redhead held his breath.

Homeir went up the stairway stealthily, opened the back door and slid through quickly. Without a moment's hesitation, Shayne followed. The bird had nibbled at the bait. It only remained for Shayne to catch him red-handed.

The darkened interior of the house was still as a cemetery. Shadows waved. Ahead of him, Shayne could make out Homeir's tall figure pause at the door he knew to be Vina Westley's bedroom. But it was a night of surprises. As Turner Homeir edged the door inward and light spilled, a sudden babble of voices filled the air.

"Rod! Haven't you left yet?" Vina Westley's voice was raised in frightened surprise.

"Vina, baby—" the rest was lost in a flurry of movement.

"Get out, you drunk. I'll scream if you don't!"

"Oh, Vina. I love you. I don't want to hurt you or see you harmed. Please, Vina!"

"Rod, will you stop!"

Michael Shayne stood where he was as Turner Homeir suddenly cursed in his throat and burst into the room where Vina Westley had also found out that Rod Felton had never gone home. The redhead hadn't counted on that either. He edged along the wall to the door, walking on silent feet.

"You idiot," Turner Homeir was roaring. "I should have known better! You really are in love with her. Well, you're not going to spoil my plans now. This will have to include you as well as Vina. I thought I'd offered you enough to be on my side."

"Turner, are you mad?" Vina was trying to be calm. "Put that gun down. What do you mean sneaking in here like a common thief?"

Shayne could hear Turner Homeir's cold chuckle.

"No, Vina. Not mad. I just hope to take everything you have. And the only way I can do that is with you dead. You and Felton. I had hoped to win that poor excuse for a business manager from you but I see now I can't. Well, he can have you now. I'm well rid of him."

"Homeir," Felton was blubbering, "you can't! Leave her alone. What good will it be to kill her now?"

Turner Homeir's rasp set

Shayne's teeth on edge. "All the good in the word. The police will never suspect a messy traffic accident. Especially a man and a woman after an all night party whose clothes will reek of alcohol."

Rod Felton turned to the girl. "It doesn't have to be this way, Vina. I love you. Give Homeir control of your stock and you'll stay alive—"

Westley shriek, the cold reality of what Turner Homeir was planning for her coming home with the first wet bite of the gin. Shayne had heard enough. He'd flushed Turner Homeir out of hiding and gotten two birds instead. But there still remained the matter of saving Vina Westley's life.

"Homeir," Rod Felton was saying again, "you can't do this. It's inhuman—"

NEXT MONTH **A NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET**

PARTNERS IN DEATH

by BRETT HALLIDAY

A cat who thinks bombs are toys, a scientist-Casanova and one murder too many are delivered to Mike's door in a package deal . . . marked C.O.D.

"Shut your mouth, you lush," snapped Homeir. "It wouldn't be this way if the brakes or the arsenic had worked. I gave you your chance and you muffed it. Now, take that gin bottle there and spill the stuff all over her like I tell you."

"Homeir—"

"Do it or I'll shoot you right now."

Michael Shayne heard Vina

He stopped talking when Shayne came into the room. Turner Homeir saw the surprise in his eyes when Felton's gaze took in the redhead. But Homeir's back was to Shayne. Before he could whirl, Shayne had rolled one of the many empty whiskey bottles from the party across the floor to distract him.

Homeir yelped and fired reflexively. As he whirled, Shayne

chopped savagely downward with his hard palm. The gun in Homeir's hand dangled nervelessly. He reeled back, falling across a fancy ottoman to the floor. When he tried to rise, still bringing the gun up, Shayne's shoe-tip shot it out of his hand with a well-aimed kick.

Rod Felton gurgled drunkenly in his throat and Vina Westley shrieked, the events of the day too much for her crowded mind.

"Party's over," Shayne said tightly, retrieving the weapon as Turner Homeir made a futile attempt to rise. "This is the fourth time you tried, Homeir. But this time you're going to pay for it."

Rod Felton's face was twitching in relief. "Shayne, you saved Vina's life—"

The redhead's lips thinned distastefully. He elbowed the young drunk out of the way.

"You sit down," he rasped. "No thanks to you she's alive. You're an accessory. All four times for my dough." He looked at Vina Westley. "I suggest you get on the phone there and call Miami Police Department. Ask for Will Gentry. The rest of this mess is up to him. He won't believe this when he's told."

Michael Shayne eyed the crestfallen Turner Homeir and the sheepish Rod Felton, both oddly to be pitied in their gigantic comedy of errors.

Vina Westley was staring at Shayne wide-eyed, as if still half-disbelieving. She was deathly pale, but her ensemble of gold lame slacks and silk blouse made her look more appealing than ever.

"MICHAEL, SHE'S still beautiful." Lucy Hamilton held up the front page of the *Miami Daily News*. A two-column photo of Vina Westley smiled out at the newspaper audience.

"Yes, she is," Shayne said, lighting a cigarette. "But she sure better learn how to pick her men. She almost got killed yesterday. Suppose she never called anybody for help? Two to one, she'd have been found in a smashed Fiat this morning."

Lucy Hamilton shivered. "I'm glad she came to see you, Michael."

Michael Shayne laughed. "I'll bet. Then you won't be annoyed if she sees me again this afternoon? She's coming to take me to dinner tonight."

Lucy snorted. "I don't wonder. You saved her life, didn't you, Michael?"

"Yes, angel, I did. Because she was beautiful, because she needed help, because I was restless and because—"

"And because," Lucy Hamilton interrupted. "The price was right."

Three SHAYNE *Stories*

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No. 1 . . . THE DEBT OF DEATH by Brett Halliday

A long-odd crime gamble in Miami may be much the same, percentage-wise, as it would be in New York or the Windy City. Except that —trapping killers in Miami was Michael Shayne's particular specialty.

No. 2 . . . BLOOD OF AN ORANGE by Brett Halliday

It was really hard for Mike Shayne to believe that an orange grove in the bright Florida sunlight could in any way be haunted by the dark specters of arson and murder. But the nightmare was real.

No. 3 . . . MURDER ON JUNGLE KEY by Brett Halliday

The murdered man had been a preacher with a rare gift of eloquence. It was hard to believe that death could have actually silenced his voice forever. So Mike listened . . . for Guilt's self-accusing whisper.

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A killer at large can turn a bus station wait into a most unusual kind of nightmare.

THE MOUSY MAN

by

MURRAY LEINSTER

BUD GRAHAME leaned closer to Stella in the least-lighted corner of the lunchroom. Her eyes went fearfully to the dark windows. She looked frightened, haggard with strain, but though there was danger for both of them, her concern was for him.

"I'm safe now!" Bud said in a low tone. "We're both safe! Now eat something, Stella. Someone might notice if you don't."

© 1962, by Murray Leinster

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. Her lips were set in tight lines and her gaze remained riveted on the window. There was absolutely nothing to be seen beyond the panes save the dim lighting inside the bus which was still within its prescribed fifteen minutes at this rest-stop restaurant.

The bus throbbed and rumbled to itself. The sound of its motor was so distinctive that one had the sensation of smelling its exhaust. If there were other sounds outside in the night, they were inaudible in the lunchroom because of the over-loud, almost blaring music from the radio.

"Take a sip of coffee, anyhow," urged Bud in awkward tenderness. "Everything's all right!"

She did not seem to hear.

Across the room the bus-driver sat on a stool at the counter, his visored cap thrust back. He talked to the counterman about his sister-in-law, who was going steady with a bum. The colored woman with gray hair sat patiently by the door. She meditated gently upon the newest, smallest grandchild she was on her way to see.

The mousy little man with the black bag had disappeared, but the fat man gobbled pie and ice-cream at one of the tables. Veins stood out on his forehead as he ate. He thought of nothing. He was absorbed in the act of eating. The elderly passenger—the one who'd taken ice-water to his car-sick wife in the bus—tried to make the best of a sandwich not made with his personal preferences in mind. He looked unhappy.

Stella tensed, and darted an apprehensive glance toward the glass-paned door.

"We couldn't be found now," repeated Bud doggedly. "And we could always ask—

The lunchroom door opened. Stella relaxed, trembling. The mousy little man with the bag came in, blinking. He was somehow bright and zestful and apologetic at the same time. He got a cup of coffee from the counterman, but he did not sit down at the counter. Instead, he gazed hopefully about the room.

There were chains of colored paper rings across the ceiling, draped over a tightened wire from which a soft-drink advertisement hung. There were slightly dusty display-signs in the windows. On the counter there was a device to dispense unwholesome-looking tinted balls of chewing-gum.

The mousy little man crossed the room and sat down carefully at the table next to Bud and Stella. He put down the coffee and laid his bag where he could regard it fondly. He sugared his coffee with great gravity, which somehow gave the effect of pleased anticipation. He looked up and saw Bud's eyes upon him.

"Coffee's good at this hour of

the night," he said. "It really warms you up!"

Bud nodded curtly. He looked down at Stella's hands, twisting nervously in her lap.

The little man said hopefully, "Not that it's cold outside. It's wonderful growing weather. And the katydids are having a time for themselves. Did you know that they chirp faster in warm weather? You can get a pretty good idea of the temperature just by listening to them."

Bud nodded impatiently. He said in a low tone to Stella, "Please eat, Stella. There's nothing to worry about any more. Just a bite."

The little man looked abashed. But then he sipped his coffee delicately from a spoon. His face expressed deep appreciation. He drew the black bag toward him. He opened it and peered in. He beamed. He gazed about him hopefully, as if anxious to show someone whatever it was that the bag contained. He was disappointed. He peeked again, and closed the bag and returned to his coffee.

The over-loud music from the radio reached a triumphant, dissonant, banging climax. It stopped. A startlingly lifelike voice said, *"More music in three minutes, folks. Right now the news."*

The bus-driver's voice was a mere murmur above the sound of the idling bus outside. He reached the point of telling the counterman how his sister-in-law was making a complete fool of herself over the bum she went steady with. The fat man wiped his mouth with two paper napkins and drew his coffee toward him.

The elderly man unhappily drank ice-water and thought wistfully of getting home, where things were as he liked them. The gray-haired colored woman thought about her youngest grandchild, who would be big-eyed and brown and satin-soft to hold. Her eyes were dreamy.

Bud watched Stella's face. It had been pale enough before, but now it had gone whiter. Her eyes searched for the radio. She found it where it sat behind the counter, next to an opened box of nickel candies and cough-drops. She seemed to stop breathing, and her hand fumbled for Bud's. He held it comfortingly tight.

"The big news tonight," said the incongruously cheerful voice from the radio, *"is still the jailbreak at Jeffersonton, where eight men broke out yesterday at sunset, carrying a guard with them for hostage. The guard was found this morning, bound hand and foot but unharmed. Three of the escaped convicts were recaptured last night, and the guard's whereabouts was learned when two others were picked up at dawn today. They led officers to where he had been left. That leaves just three of the fugitives at large. They are*

Thomas Sullivan, a lifer in for first degree murder and said to be dangerous—"

Stella's eyes closed and she swayed. Bud put his arm fiercely about her shoulders.

"Steady!" he whispered harshly. "Don't let go like that—"

She leaned against him as if in weakness. He held a glass of water to her lips. She turned her head aside. But both of them had missed phrases of the news broadcast. When Bud turned his face to the radio again it was saying with the same false heartiness:

". . . believed certain to be captured shortly. For more cheerful news—the Yankees won today, five to three, so ending a three-game losing streak, and—"

The voice went on with highly conventional enthusiasm. Bud put down the glass. Stella was trembling violently now.

The mousy little man shook his head sadly. But then he looked at the bag on the table before him, and his eyes lighted up. He saw Stella's face, and said solicitously, "She doesn't feel well?"

"No," said Bud curtly. "She doesn't. But she'll be all right. It's not serious."

"I'll bet," said the little man sympathetically," that the place where she's going isn't home. We never feel badly when we're going home—or to a place that is going to be home. Mostly we feel badly when we don't quite know what our destination is. I'd be willing to bet—"

His voice trailed away when Bud paid no attention. Then Stella managed to say something, inaudibly. Bud looked at the mousy man again.

"I missed part of that broadcast," he said harshly. "That Sullivan. The murderer who escaped. He hasn't been caught. Did the broadcast say he'd been sighted anywhere?"

The mousy man shook his head. But he said reassuringly, "No. But he will be, never fear. Oh, he will be!" Then he added hopefully, "I've read quite a lot about criminals. It's very interesting! Most of them are terribly impulsive, and that's what gets them into trouble. Even when they escape. Just impulsiveness. Even though being impulsive may cost them their liberty again!

"And they crave to be free! Without reason, without limit, without any relief. I've read that even a starving man never craves food as badly as a prisoner can come to want freedom." Then he added zestfully, "It's very curious, too, because stone walls do not a prison make."

Bud was not listening. The little man stopped disappointedly.

The music blared, and it was possible to realize that there had been night-insects singing outside, because their song was now drowned out by saxophones. Stel-

la's hands twisted. She murmured desperately to Bud.

The little man leaned over. "She really doesn't look well," he said anxiously. "Does she want anything? I'll be glad to get—"

"Nothing," said Bud curtly. "She just said that this seems like a long rest-stop. We should be moving."

The mousy man beamed. "The bus is ahead of schedule, so the driver's killing time here. He has to keep to schedule or people might miss the bus, you see."

Across the lunchroom the bus-driver gave the counterman additional evidence of the fact that his sister-in-law's steady was a bum. The music on the radio came to an end, and was immediately replaced by other music which sounded exactly like it. The bus in the darkness outside rumbled and hummed and purred.

The music broke off in the middle of a bar. The zestful voice boomed from the radio:

"Here's a special news bulletin! The police of Barneville have reported a shooting in that town which may be linked to the escaped prisoners from Jeffersonton! Mr. Jacob Dunn, of Barneville, has been found unconscious outside his home with a bullet-wound in his right shoulder. His car is missing. It is assumed that he heard a noise at the garage, went out, and discovered a thief or thieves making off with the car. His face is badly bruised as if he were beaten before he was shot. It is believed that one of the three escaped prisoners still at large may be responsible." . .

The music came back. Stella's face was ashen now.

Bud clamped his jaws together. "Next door," he told her with infinite grimness. "Next door to our house."

The mousy little man had listened to the broadcast with an air of distress. Now he looked unhappy. Bud leaned forward, hiding Stella's face from view, his hands clenching and unclenching.

"It's terrible!" said the little man. "Shooting someone because one wants his car. It really seems that criminals want things so badly that they can't think of consequences. As if they couldn't resist impulses in real life any more than the rest of us in dreams.

"And yet they're so much like us. I've read that men in prison often stint themselves of candy and cigarette money to subscribe to their home town papers, so they can read about things and people they know. They get homesick just like anybody else. You wouldn't think that, would you? Can you understand it?"

"Yes," said Bud savagely. "They want to keep track of people they mean to kill when they get out."

The mousy man blinked. He was shocked. He looked like some-

one who'd been harshly scolded.

Bud turned farther from him to shield Stella more completely from view. He murmured fierce, comforting, encouraging things.

"Dunn didn't know where we—not where we'd try to go. He'd have no way of knowing." He swallowed. Such protests were futile, and Stella knew better than to be reassured by them.

"Steady, Stella," he said urgently, under his breath. "We'll get going in a minute now. Then we'll be all right. And you don't want anybody to know you knew him. They'll catch him. They'll have road-blocks everywhere. He's given himself away. The state cops will be swarming." He added fiercely, "Even if he did beat Dunn to make him talk, he couldn't know exactly—"

The mousy man reached over and touched his shoulder. "Please," he said unhappily. "Please forgive me. It seems that you are—concerned about—what the broadcaster said."

Bud's eyes burned. "The man who was beaten and shot," he said savagely," was a neighbor of ours. That's all!"

He returned to Stella. The mousy man seemed to shrink from the anger in Bud's voice. His eyes went dolefully about the lunchroom. He picked up the black bag and held it, as if to do so gave him comfort.

The colored woman, sitting by the door, tenderly remembered her oldest daughter when she was the age of the newest and youngest grandchild. She smiled to herself, oblivious of the news bulletins. The elderly man consoled himself with the reflection that tomorrow he and his wife would be at home again, where everything was what they were accustomed to.

The bus hummed and rumbled in the darkness outside. The fat man finished his coffee and sat comfortably, thinking of nothing whatever.

Music blared and pounded where the bus-driver expressed his vexation that his wife would let a bum like that come to the house to see her sister.

Stella moved her lips faintly. Bud bent close to hear.

The radio cut off once more. The vastly cheerful voice boomed:

"Another bulletin. Plenty of excitement tonight, folks. Half an hour ago a man was taken to the hospital in Darden from the railroad yard, where he tried to board a freight train, fell off, and broke his leg. He's just admitted that he's one of the escaped prisoners from Jeffersonton. No other details yet. More news when we get it."

Music again. Bud murmured into Stella's ear, "It's all right. It'll be okay. Just a minute now and we'll start off."

The mousy little man plucked at Bud's shoulder once more. He lacked something of his former

zestful air, but he was very hopeful.

"Perhaps she didn't hear that news," he said apologetically. "Another one of those men was caught. Maybe he's the one who injured your neighbor."

"He took a car," cried Bud fiercely. "He's after us. Leave me alone."

He turned back to Stella. The music was a dancing, elaborate mingling of counterpoint on strings below a slurred and moaning melody of clarinets. A piano played percussion. Something like maraccas hit the offbeats and trumpets swung into strident sound.

There was a change of illumination in the night outside. A faint radiance played on the stationary side of the waiting bus. It wavered and grew brighter. Headlights.

The mousy man hesitated, and reached out his hand and hesitated again. Then he touched Bud's shoulder and said urgently, "Forgive me, but maybe she'll feel better now. That will be a state police car coming, almost certainly."

Bud raised his head. He stared. He strained his ears, as if they could have told him something through the din of broadcast instruments. The light grew very bright on the side of the bus. The unseen other car—from the direction from which the bus itself had come—would not pass by.

It was swerving to the side of the highway. It stopped when its headlights on the bus were brilliant. Then, suddenly, they snapped off.

Stella's eyes were fixed upon the windows. She seemed to shiver. Bud turned his head to stare.

It could be seen that something moved outside the lunchroom. But what moved could not be distinguished. Then the faint glow of the opened front door of the bus was obscured. Someone or something went into the bus. There was a pause. Something or someone came out again. There was another pause.

Then a gun exploded thunderously, its flash lighting the dark body of the bus for the fraction of an instant.

The mumbling bus-engine made shrieking noises. It stopped.

The bus-driver whirled on his stool, his mouth dropping open. The colored woman jerked her head around, startled. The elderly man dropped his glass of ice-water. All eyes turned blankly to the door.

But Bud Grahame moved. Swiftly, with a quick, urgent gesture, he thrust Stella from her seat and onto the floor where she was partly hidden. He stood up, his nostrils distended. With clenched hands he moved toward the lunchroom entrance.

And a man came in. Sullivan. Smiling quite without mirth. Since his escape he'd somehow gotten

summer clothing which did not fit him. His tie was askew, and his eyes were deep-sunken and glowing. He had a pistol in his hand.

The mousy little man made a tiny whimpering noise. Sullivan's features changed horribly when he saw Bud. One knew that this was the moment he'd worked and plotted and schemed for. His face contorted with blazing hate. He raised the pistol—and Bud Grahame plunged for him, barehanded.

The mousy little man threw his black bag. He threw it violently. It struck the face of the grimacing man just as his finger contracted on the trigger. It was not heavy. It did not even jar him. But it blinded him, and spoiled his aim.

The pistol roared and smoke billowed, and then—Bud Grahame was upon him. They crashed to the floor and rolled over, locked in furious combat.

In another moment the bus-driver was trying to pull Grahame off, holding the dropped and recovered pistol in his hand. Bud was pounding Sullivan's head crazily on the floor.

"Hold it! Ease up!" gasped the bus-driver, tugging at the youth's arm in alarm. "You'll kill him! Can't you see he's out cold?"

"That's Sullivan," panted Bud thickly. "One of the men who—got away from Jeffersonton. He shot Mr. Dunn in Barneville. He's the murderer!"

"He aimed to kill somebody, all right," agreed the bus-driver, turning a white face toward the counterman. "*Yeah!* Hey—we better get some rope, and tie this baby up. And somebody better phone the cops, too—on the double."

The counterman was equally pale. He said, "No telephone," and vanished to look for some rope.

Bud Grahame went back and picked Stella up from the floor. His eyes burned, and he was shaking with rage. But he held Stella tenderly close. She swayed a little and clung to him.

The mousy little man anxiously retrieved his black bag. He held it tight. Then he wetted his lips and said with a sudden, totally unexpected firmness, "If there's no telephone and the bus can't run, then somebody has to go for the police."

Then the firmness seemed to go out of him. "I think I'd better have someone go with me. Would you—." He touched Bud Grahame pleadingly on the arm. "Would you—please come? I feel terrible. We have to tell the police about this. And she might feel better in the open air."

Bud seemed not to hear him for an instant. Then he straightened and said sharply, "Yes. We'll go with you."

He supported Stella, guiding her around the unconscious man on the floor. She moved like a

sleep-walker, her features shockingly white. The mousy little man held the door open. The music from the radio filled the lunchroom with sound, even as the acrid smell of gunpowder spread to its every corner.

The air outside was fresh and clean-smelling. There was the whirring, monotonous sound of night-creatures singing to the stars. The mousy man led the way quickly around to the back of the bus.

"He'd have left the key in the car," he said. "Criminals—always do. They have to. It should be here."

The car was there. It was parked behind the bus. He opened a door, so Bud could help Stella in.

"You'll drive?" asked the mousy man hopefully. "And I'll ride beside you? With her in between us?"

When Bud nodded he climbed in on the other side. Bud grimly turned the ignition-key. The car quivered and roared. Its wheels spun when he backed it. Then he sent it roaring away down the dark and empty highway. The lighted lunchroom and the now-silent bus were swiftly left behind.

Stella wept suddenly, but not for long. The mousy little man sat precisely upright in his seat, holding his black bag firmly. When Stella said unsteadily, "I'm all right now, Bud," he turned his head.

"I'm glad," he said, a little hesitantly. "I feel terrible myself, but somehow I thought that you—you especially—did not want to stay there. I hate to think of striking someone, but—what else could I do? Did you know him?"

Bud said with bitter harshness, "Stella was married to him once. She got a divorce when he killed somebody. She married me after he went to prison. When he escaped, we knew he'd want to kill us both. We didn't want to ask police protection because we hoped nobody'd ever know that Stella had been married to a man like that. So I took her away, because she was afraid for me.

"But when he couldn't find us at home, he beat up our next-door neighbor, found out from him that we'd just gone off on the bus, and came after us."

The mousy little man hugged his black bag solemnly to his breast. Presently he said hopefully, "Somehow I feel better. He certainly shouldn't have tried to kill somebody, just because he'd gotten free. And maybe nobody will know that he was after you. When your neighbor gets well, you can ask him not to tell. And nobody knew who you were, in the lunchroom. We were all strangers—there for the first time."

He nodded, his features illumined by the light from the instrument-board. The car purred and rolled along the road. Presently the mousy man unfastened the catch of his bag and peered

inside. He could not see clearly. He felt with his hand.

"They could do with some water, but I think they're all right. These are cuttings," he explained brightly,"from where I've been a gardener for years. The parent plants never did very well there, but I'm sure I know just what sort of soil they'll thrive in. I'm going to plant them and water them and watch them grow and bloom like they should. It'll be very satisfying. I expect to be very happy, if you—" He was suddenly hesitant again, "if you don't mind helping me."

Bud glanced at him. "Help you? How?" he asked.

"I'm one of the men," said the little man apologetically, "who escaped from Jeffersonton. It was—very foolish of me. I was coming up for parole in three months, and both the warden and the chaplain said I was certain to be freed. I really think I'm one of the people who are helped by prison, because I learned gardening there.

"But when the others approached me to help them escape, which I could do because I was a gardener—I simply couldn't say no. I wanted so terribly to be free. Even though I knew that real freedom is inside a man—" His voice faltered. "I couldn't wait. I brought some clippings because I planted them myself. But I wanted to be free."

Stella touched Bud's hand. He nodded in quick understanding.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked grimly. "I'd very likely have been killed, but for you. Stella too. What do you want me to do?"

"Just let me out of the car somewhere," said the little man diffidently. "You see, I can't drive a car. And if you hadn't driven me away, why, when the police arrived at the lunchroom, they'd have found me there."

Bud drove on in silence, his eyes on the road ahead. One mile. Three. Twenty. It was thirty full miles before the highway ran into a city of some size. There the car threaded its way through arc-lighted streets, with darkened buildings looming on both sides of them. Only the bus-station was brightly lighted. Somewhere behind it an interurban bus idled, waiting, its motor making a dull, throbbing sound. There was a faint sound of radio music, too.

Bud stopped the car, and turned to the little man at his side.

"So far as I know," he said evenly, "your name is Smith and you're on your way to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where you live with your wife. You directed me through the streets of this town to the home of a friend you're going to visit for a few days before you go on. I don't know this town, and couldn't possibly find the house you directed me to. Right?"

The little man said, in a voice

tremulous with gratitude, "It's very good of you. You are two wonderful people."

He got carefully out of the car, holding his black bag tightly.

"You said," Bud reminded him, "that only people on the way home feel really good. Can you go home?"

"Freedom," said the little man, "is in here." He tapped his breast. "But home is where one has flowers growing."

Bud nodded, and watched the little man turn and walk briskly into the bus-station.

"I wonder," said Bud, an instant before he started the car again. "I wonder if that was the right thing to do?"

He fumbled and found the switch of the car-radio. He turned it. There was a pause as the set warmed up. Then a male voice, crisp and hearty:

". . . *of the escaped convicts remaining at large . . . one of these two joined the jail-break when he was due to be released in less than three months more. Prison officials say—*"

Bud Grahame snapped the radio off. He turned the car about, not hurrying, to look for a policeman to direct him to the police station, so that he could report what had happened thirty miles back along the road.

He thought, irrelevantly, of the plant clippings carried so carefully in the small man's black bag—and he hoped they'd get their chance to bloom beyond prison walls.

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Murderer's Role

Parkhurst wasn't the best of actors. But when Death cued him . . . his stage presence was superb.

by TALMAGE POWELL

ORRIN PARKHURST arrived at Blane's office late in the afternoon. Vingie, Blane's girl Friday, didn't bother to conceal her annoyance.

"Mr. Blane is out, Mr. Parkhurst, as I told you on the phone."

"He's been out—to me—for a very long time now," Parkhurst said.

Vingie was a cool looking brunette who wore her hair in a bun, her body in tweeds, and her feet in comfortably large flat-heeled shoes. "Really, Mr. Parkhurst, these things do happen."

"Things?"

"I think you know what I mean."

"That I'm washed up? That a producer of Blane's reputation will never be in to me again?"

"I'm very busy, Mr. Parkhurst."

"There was a time." Parkhurst

© 1962, by Talmage Powell

said, "when you'd have gasped over my autograph."

Vingie spun her chair toward her typewriter. "I don't collect autographs, Mr. Parkhurst. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"Does Blane still belong to the Seven Arts Club?"

"I couldn't say."

"Vingie," Parkhurst said quietly, "your time may come, you know."

"Good day, Mr. Parkhurst."

"You could arrange an interview."

The typewriter began clicking.

Parkhurst stood a moment. "It would cost you nothing."

There was no break in the typing rhythm.

"I need a part badly," Parkhurst said. "I need one desperately. I don't know how much longer I can hang on."

The typewriter stopped with an abruptness that was almost a small crash. "This is a business office, Mr. Parkhurst. Is there any reason why Mr. Blane should grant you an interview?"

"I'm a competent actor."

"The world is full of them."

"Blane is a producer," Parkhurst persisted, "who has a new play with a part I can do and do well."

Vingie rested her elbows on her desk. "I'm going to be kind to you, Mr. Parkhurst, and give you some good advice. Quit. Give up. Admit your day is done. You were a good leading man once. You must have some wonderfully fat scrapbooks and memories. Why don't you just let it go at that?"

"I must have a role," Parkhurst said doggedly.

He wondered if he should try to explain to her. The theater was his life. He'd been dying a long time now. Dying for years. His light, sophisticated comedies had been the rage once. His name had guaranteed the success of any film. He'd had the pick of Hollywood's and Broadway's most scintillating leading ladies.

Where, when, or how the plunge down had started, he couldn't exactly say. It had been as if a mysterious force had pushed his life onto the wrong tangent. For one thing, World War II had come along. When it was over, he was no longer in demand. The frothy things he'd done seemed silly to a world beset by atomic bombs and missiles that flew faster than sound.

Down, *down,* down. Like a blind man staggering through a nightmare. Smaller parts, until none were left. Shabbier rooms, greasier meals. Finally, anything to keep body and soul in union. Until a month ago . . . That did it. He'd been required to stand on a stage and deliver a mock political address while a scantily-dressed girl went through gyrations that brought whistles from

the brothers of the fraternal order attending the smoker.

The skit had ended with the girl smacking him in the face with a cream pie while he stood resplendent in his rented tuxedo still spouting his double entendre speech. The brothers in the smoky hall had thought it was great.

Parkhurst, that night, had wondered for the first time how much nerve, or lack of it, a man needed to kill himself.

Parkhurst's long silence had brought attentiveness to Vingie's face. "Mr. Parkhurst, are you feeling all right?"

Her concern was a surface thing. She didn't care, actually, how he felt. It would be a mistake to try and explain to her. It would be the casting in the mud of the final pearl.

Parkhurst shook his head and the typewriter resumed its clatter as he moved toward the door.

At the door, he stopped. "Vingie!"

She spun angrily, but she didn't speak. Something in Parkhurst's face and attitude caught her, held her motionless with her mouth open.

"Vingie, I can't carry this burden with me any longer. I'm not speaking of the role now. I'm speaking of life—and death."

He moved downstage in the office, a few steps toward her, his timing perfect, his face expressing the despair of a man who has seen an ultimate horror inside of himself.

Vingie tried to recover her coolness. It wasn't easy, not while watching him.

"I killed my wife last night," Parkhurst said. "Do you know why? I couldn't bear to see her suffer any longer, the suffering that came gradually from knowing that I'm a washout who can't provide or take care of her."

Vingie recovered a measure of her poise. "Now, Mr. Parkhurst . . ."

"You do believe me? All night long the night before I'd heard her weeping. I decided to end it. I took a knife . . ." The gestures of his hands, the inward collapse of the man completed the sentence more eloquently than words.

"Say," Vingie said, "that's quite good! You can act, at that."

"Don't you understand what I'm saying? I killed Theresa last night!"

"Sure, with a knife. I know. And you almost had me going for a minute just now." Vingie inserted a fresh sheet in her typewriter. "But the answer is still the same. You can't have the appointment with Mr. Blane."

Thirty minutes later, Parkhurst shuffled into Beetle Barney's Bastion. He dropped on a stool at the bar and rested his face in his palms. He jerked his head up quickly; the line of his chin and

jaw was too razor sharp and gaunt against his hands.

He glimpsed himself in the back-bar mirror. The face there aroused in him a sort of sick contempt. Gone the firm handsome lines. Nothing left now but the gauntness, the creases in the loose flesh of the cheeks. The face was sallow, dead-looking in skin tone, but it harbored a wildness in the eyes and a terrible desperation.

The proprietor, a fat, happy man, said, "Hi, Mr. Parkhurst."

Parkhurst tried to pull the edges of himself together. "Hello, Beetle."

"What'll it be?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—"

"Look, I done told you. What's a few drinks? To you, they're on the house. You're a gentleman. You never get soused. You never try to cage 'em. And wasn't never anybody in the Bastion before like you. I mean, before you came along, never been a really big man in here. Know what I patter? Really big."

Beetle set out a large shot glass and pulled a quart of whiskey from under the bar. A bewhiskered, bloated old man down the bar looked at the bottle as if he had a vague, distant memory of the label.

"Thank you, Beetle," Parkhurst said. His voice was grim, as if inside he was raw, seared, wounded from being the recipient of charity.

Beetle missed the tone. He poured a double shot. Parkhurst hefted the glass in a toast. "To you, Beetle. A prince, whatever your surroundings."

Beetle's stomach shook with silent, pleased laughter. "That's what I like about you, Mr. Parkhurst. A real gentleman. All the way gentleman. Boy, those pictures you used to make."

Beetle paused to remember, smile, and finally laugh at the remembered scenes. "The wife and I still talk about those pictures, when something happens to remind us. They don't make pictures like that anymore. They sure don't."

For which, Parkhurst thought, the public seems grateful.

He had a second drink, and then a third. "Beetle, I'm drinking of necessity today."

"You mean you lost that big part?"

"Not yet. I'm trying, Beetle. Desperately. Do you know what it is to try in sheer desperation?"

Beetle shook his head.

"Sheer desperation," Parkhurst said. "Two little over-used words. They're not real to most people, not until you start living within their definition."

"Gee, that sounds tough, Mr. Parkhurst."

"Yes. Well, one more drink. I need a great deal of courage. I'm going to crash the Seven Arts Club to see a man, an important

producer, Beetle. I knew him a long time ago, when he was starting. In fact, you might say I started him. I loaned him money, enough money to buy several places like this one, Beetle."

"You were sure on top, all right. A real champ."

"He paid it back, scrupulously, and with interest. He's not indebted to me, do you think?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that."

"Beetle, I'm warm to your loyalty and your whiskey. As a matter of fact, I'm damn near tight enough to crash the Seven Arts Club—and to tell you what I must."

"What is that, Mr. Parkhurst?"

Parkhurst hesitated, glanced about. The strain grew inside of him, peering from his eyes, oiling his face. He motioned Beetle closer. When the dramatic pause reached the peak of intensity, he said softly, "I killed my wife last night, Beetle."

Beetle's knuckles whitened on the edge of the bar. He swallowed, and it made a damply rasping whisper of sound in his throat.

"I took a knife, Beetle, and I killed her. Quickly. Mercifully."

"Now, Mr. Parkhurse—"

"She didn't suffer, Beetle. It was unexpected. She was in my arms. The knife slid home before she knew what was happening."

"Mr. Parkhurst, you mean that frail little woman, Theresa, who works in the garment district?"

"The same, Beetle. The little woman who toils over the machine in the foul air of the old loft so that I may seek a comeback."

Beetle straightened and studied Parkhurst. Then his round face split in a grin. "You're a real corker, all right. They just don't have that kind of acting on TV or in pictures anymore. No, sir. Have another drink. Wait'll I tell my wife about this."

"You don't believe me, Beetle?"

"You're an actor, ain't you? If you'd killed her last night, you wouldn't be sitting here telling me about it now, would you? Nah, you'd be in jail or making tracks."

"I see," Parkhurst said. "With your permission, I'll take a rain-check on the drink. I believe I have had a sufficient quantity already."

THE UNIFORMED DOORMAN at the Seven Arts Club was a big fellow; but he was not accustomed to dealing with such crazed determination. The half-drunken, tall, skinny man of middle age who mumbled that he was Orrin Parkhurst, the star, shoved the doorman aside and walked in as if he actually were a matinee idol.

The doorman rushed after him and caught up with Parkhurst midway across the vaulted foyer. Parkhurst shook free with an imperious command to keep hands off.

"Now, look, fellow—" the doorman began.

"Get out of my way!" Parkhurst shouted. "Keep your place, I say!"

Several members came to the doorway of the loung to see what the commotion was about. Blane was among those who entered the foyer.

A short, blocky man with a thatch of red hair, Blane said, "Parkhurst, what are you doing here?"

"Trying to see you," Parkhurst said, straightening the lapels of his threadbare but carefully pressed suit.

"Do you know this man, sir?" the doorman asked.

"Well, I—" Blane said.

"Certainly he knows me. He's known me for years. Blane, you may not know it, but that little witch in your office is fouling up your business but good. Takes too much authority. She tried to tell me you wouldn't see me."

The doorman edged toward Parkhurst, looking at Blane for instructions. At an imperceptible nod, more a flick of Blane's eyes, the doorman drew back.

Blane took Parkhurst by the arm. "You look as if you need a drink. Then I'll drop you at home on my way downtown. I was just leaving, but one drink—for old time's sake."

"I don't want a drink," Parkhurst said. "I want a part."

"This is hardly the time."

"Why not? And I—"

"Yes, Parkhurst?"

"I must tell you something. It's of a personal nature—I don't know how to say—Blane, I killed my wife last night."

Parkhurst's face registered, first, disbelief at his own words, and then a dramatic sense of relief that the festering pus had spilled out of his spirit for all the world to see. It was so dramatic that it brought a gasp from the cluster of members. A rustle seemed to pass among them. Blane's hand shivered on Parkhurst's arm, then dropped away.

Parkhurst took two steps wideways, rested his hand for support on the edge of a table. He stood with his head bowed. Then he raised it slowly, his eyes depthless, beads of sweat glistening in the creases of his face.

"She'd been dying, slowly, for a long time," he said in a husky whisper that carried to the furthest corners of the foyer. "A death of the soul that I could no longer endure watching. I had to put an end to it."

The watching members exchanged glances. One of the hardier, a tall, athletic looking man with iron-gray hair, took silent command and moved forward. "Blane," he said, "I think we must call the police."

Parkhurst turned his head slowly. Blane was rubbing his jaw with

his knuckles. Then he laughed, softly. "It wasn't bad, Parkhurst."

Blane glanced at the other club members. "He's doing a part. Somehow or other he's seen a copy of the script of my new play. An agent, I'm sure, gave him the look-see. A man such as Parkhurst always has the chance, however dim and remote, of making a comeback, and there are many agents who'd like to be in on the ground floor."

The members began to relax. "If you're sure, Blane—"

"Oh, I'm sure. Who sneaked you a look at the script, Parkhurst?"

"Smathers."

"Good agent, though I question some of his ideas."

"Well," Parkhurst said, his voice tainted with a kind of agony, "do I get the part?"

"Ummmm. I don't know. You almost had me believing for a second, and that's what you've got to do, make them believe."

"I've always made audiences believe!"

"I'll tell you what, Parkhurst. I'm having dinner at home. Call me shortly before I dine. Say, at seven."

"Blane, you'll never regret—"

"I haven't said yes. Let me think about it. You call me."

Parkhurst nodded. He squared his shoulders. He gave the club members a little bow worthy of a prince. Then he walked out of the club with the stride of a man who has vaulted to the top of the world.

PARKHURST SAT alone in the empty silence of the shabby room-and-kitchenette apartment. He wished he had not had to lose his watch to the pawnbroker. Surely the cheap dimestore clock was wrong. Hours must have passed and the clock indicated only five minutes to seven.

He chose a butt from the ash-tray and lighted it. He got up, walked back and forth, turned into the kitchenette. He picked up the heavy butcher knife, looked at it, and smiled to himself. Then he used the knife to cut a bit of cheese from the piece on the scarred table.

Nibbling the cheese used another two minutes. He let out a gasping sigh. Then he left the apartment, ran down the gloomy, ill-smelling stairs, and dropped his last dime into the phone.

His hands were so damp he wiped his palm on his pants leg before he tried to dial. He moved from one foot to the other while the phone rang at the other end, the phone in a different world.

A servant answered. Yes, Mr. Blane was expecting a call. Will you hold a moment, Mr. Parkhurst?

Parkhurst's heart beat with such speed that it made him dizzy.

Then Blane's voice, "Parkhurst? It was nice seeing you again. But

about the part, I'm afraid the answer is no."

"Blane?" Parkhurst croaked.

"Yes?"

"You said—"

"I'm sorry, old man. If a little loan would help—"

Parkhurst's fingers dug chunks out of the rotten plaster beside the phone. A loan Blane knew he could never repay. Charity. Didn't Blane understand anything . . .

"Please, Blane, give me a chance. That's all I ask. Just a chance to—"

"I'm sorry, Parkhurst," Blane's tone stiffened a little. The tone said: Don't snivel. Let's not get disgusting about this.

"I know I could do it, Blane. If you'd give me a run-through."

"It's an important part, Parkhurst, in an important play."

"I know!" *How sickeningly well I know* . . . "If you'd only permit a run-through. It wouldn't take long."

"To be frank, Parkhurst, you almost had it, there at the club. But I didn't quite *believe*. Perhaps because you didn't quite believe. You were acting, not living it. The feeling—it wasn't quite there. Goodbye, Parkhurst. I'm very sorry it turned out that way."

After Blane hung up, Parkhurst stood with the phone in his hand for several seconds. Then he dropped the phone and started up the endless, dreary stairs. With the groping gestures of a blind man, he made his way into the apartment.

He shuffled to the kitchenette and folded his arms on the table and laid his head on them.

In a short time, he heard Theresa come in. Her dragging steps told him how tired she was. He raised his head, but he didn't speak. He couldn't think of words to express another failure. So close to the part. So very close. He'd almost had Blane, Vingie, Beetle.

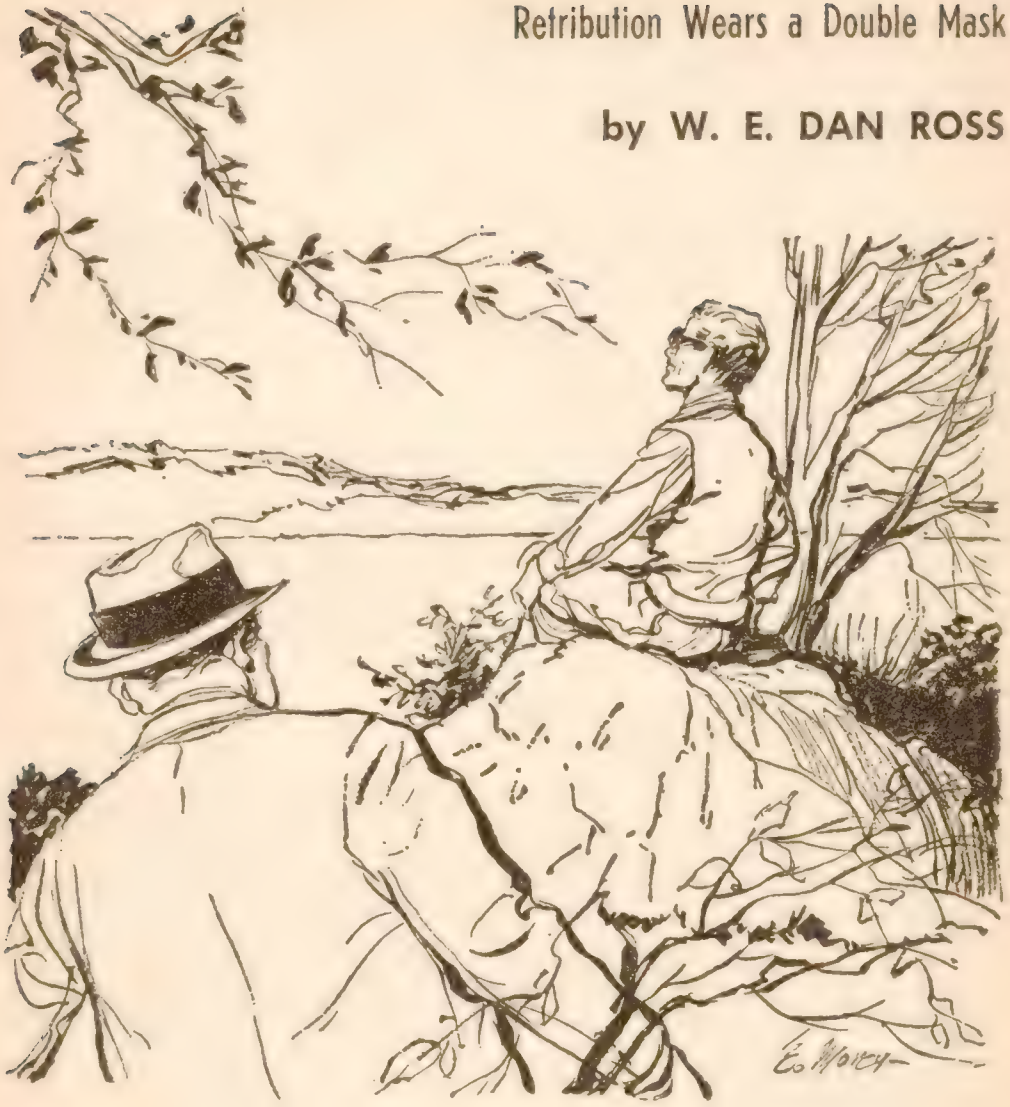
But not close enough. Because he'd been acting, not living the part. Not quite believing. Not feeling it, deep down. Not having the understanding of a thing that's real.

The waning light from outside caught on the knife. He picked it up without fully realizing he had done so. He looked at it a moment. Then he stood up, holding himself very straight, his stage presence superb. He held the knife pointed up, concealed behind his arm. He must, by all means, be merciful.

The low note of sadness did not hide the fresh flicker of hope in his voice. "Theresa, my dear," he said, "will you step here a moment, please."

Retribution Wears a Double Mask

by W. E. DAN ROSS



Blind Man's Bluff

NIEL HENDERSON stopped at the combination gas station and store of the mountain village. The proprietor told him what turn on the main road led to the lodge where Tom Baxter and Shiela were living. The place belonged to Shiela. She and her first husband, Len Perry, had used it as a summer residence. A year after

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Len's accidental drowning she'd married Baxter and they'd come up here to live. That was one of the things that intensely interested Henderson.

It was typical of the graying ex-detective that he should spend the first week of his retirement making this trip to clear up some unfinished business. He guided his station-wagon over the last half-mile of the bumpy side road and came out on the gravel drive of a luxurious lodge. It was located on a high knoll overlooking neat rolling lawns that were fringed with great pines.

He saw Shiela standing on the verandah as he descended from the car. He went up to her. She was still blonde and beautiful, with the cold enigmatic charm of a slender ice crystal on a frosted-over window pane.

She smiled and said quietly, "Somehow I felt you'd come by some day."

"I didn't think you'd remember me," he said. "It was several years ago and we only met a couple of times during the investigation."

"I remember you," she said.

"I was just travelling this way on the first stage of my vacation." He tried to sound casual. "I read about the trouble up here. Wasn't it on this lawn that Bradley Kane was shot?"

"Down there." The long blonde hair rippled in the light wind as she inclined her head. "He was standing about fifteen feet away from the verandah when it happened."

"Out there." Henderson stared with professional interest.

"Perhaps a foot nearer. Len had invited Tom and Bradley Kane up for some hunting. Kane went out on the lawn to take some snapshots for us. Tom and I were standing right here. Len was sitting on the steps cleaning a gun. It went off and the bullet pierced Kane's heart." She said it tonelessly, as if each word had been memorized and recited many times before.

Henderson nodded grimly. "An accident no one could have prevented."

"An extremely disturbing accident." The delicately arched brows went up as she glanced at him. "What else *could* it have been? The authorities up here didn't even bother with an inquest. And why should they? Len was stone blind."

Henderson sighed. "Yes. I read all about it in the papers. You know, I've always felt badly about not finding the man who threw the acid at Len and Tom that night as they left the broadcasting station."

She shrugged. "I'm sure you tried."

"I did. There was one man I strongly suspected, but I just couldn't connect him with the punk who'd been hired to throw

the acid. Crooked unions have been responsible for a lot of rotten things. But that attack was utterly vicious."

"It didn't stop Len with going on with his work," she said.

Henderson's interest was aroused by a board with three bell push-buttons that was nailed to the verandah railing. "Unusual," he said directing her attention to it with a nod. "What's that for?"

"Len had it put there." She pressed one of the buttons and there was a loud buzz from across the lawn near the trees. Henderson looked in the direction of the sound and saw that a small target had been set up a considerable distance from the house.

Shiela pressed the second button and another target across the lawn repeated the buzzing signal. The same thing happened when she activated a third target, set at right angles to the others.

With a smile she explained: "Len used those targets for rifle practice."

Henderson said, "Len was marvelous in overcoming his blindness. What a pity he died so soon and so tragically."

"He'd be alive today if he hadn't been so reckless. He worried me by insisting on swimming in the lake. The day it happened he must have become confused, for he swam in the wrong direction. I tried to help him but I couldn't get to him in time."

"I can imagine what a shock it must have been," Henderson said. "By the way, will I have a chance to have a chat with Tom before I leave?"

At the mention of her second husband's name Shiela's tone became warm. "He'll be delighted to see you. He's down at the lake."

Henderson had no difficulty following the path to the lakeshore. He found Tom Baxter sitting on a large rock, relaxing in the mid-day sun. At the sound of the detective's approach Tom's tanned face turned inquiringly in his direction.

"Well," Niel Henderson said. "It's been quite some time!"

Tom held out his hand. "Yes. I'm afraid I don't recall—"

"Henderson, D.A.'s office." The stout man laughed. "But I'm not on an official errand today. I've just retired."

"Good," Tom Baxter looked out across the lake. "We don't get much news here. We live very quietly."

Henderson noted the trailing white scars on Tom Baxter's forehead and cheek. "The acid splashed on you too, as I remember. You spent several weeks in the hospital."

"Yes. But for Len it was much more tragic and shocking. In one second darkness came to him forever."

Henderson cleared his throat.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

Baxter returned Henderson's level stare through the dark glasses he wore. "Yes?" he asked.

"It concerns the accidental shooting of Bradley Kane."

"Kane!" Tom Baxter's voice became bitter. "That crooked lawyer. Was he such a loss?"

"I imagine," Henderson went on quietly, "that you and Len knew as much about him as I did. There's no doubt in my mind that he was the one behind the crooked union bunch. His cash paid the stooge that threw the acid at you two. I was sure of it, but I couldn't pin it on him. You did a much better job."

Tom Baxter smiled. "It was an accident. Don't you believe what you read in the papers?"

"Not always," Henderson said dryly. "I don't know how you got him up here. But I imagine Shiela was the bait. Kane had a weakness for beautiful women." Henderson paused. "The rest I didn't have to have blue-printed. Even though Len was blind he retained his proficiency as a crack shot. He rigged that set of targets and the buzzers to keep in practice. He learned to shoot by ear."

"He was a wonder," Tom said, nodding. "A blind man who remained a perfect shot."

"Yes," Henderson's eyes narrowed. "Still—he missed Kane."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it. And for the record, you needn't worry. I simply want to straighten things out in my own mind. It's just something that has intrigued me. What I find out, it will go no further. Isn't it true that Len missed Kane?"

"If he did—who killed him?"

"You," Henderson said. "You've won trophies for your marksmanship many times. You were standing behind him on the verandah. Probably with a gun equipped with a silencer."

Tom Baxter shrugged. "All right, I shot him. Afterwards, Shiela helped me exchange my gun for Len's, so that Len would suspect nothing. I didn't want him to think he'd failed."

"I guess you had a moral right to settle with Kane that way," Henderson said, "since it was the only way, even though you didn't have as strong a personal motive."

Tom laughed lightly. "I happened to be in complete agreement with Len concerning that kind of viciousness."

"I knew you must have killed Kane," Henderson said. "Even though Len was a crack shot, it was just too neat. It would take more than luck to send a bullet directly through a man's heart. No blind man could do it."

"Don't ask me to agree with you." Tom Baxter smiled as he removed the dark glasses he'd been wearing and gazed directly into the sun with blank eyes.

(Continued from other side)

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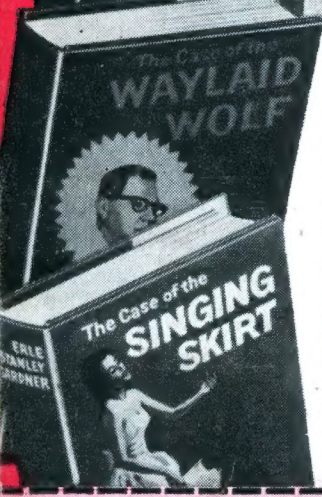

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